Via Lactea
Vol. 4
Gu Xue Rou
TO RULE IN
A TURBULENT WORLD

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Glossary

[VOLUME 4]

Arc 4: Shorthand Tablature of Magnolia Blossoms

[Chapter 47]

When the afternoon came around, You Miao was falling asleep. He kept nodding, his head hitting the table repeatedly, but he just couldn't perk himself up. Sun Yu was talking to Tang Bo in the background, their voices a hypnotic buzz, and finally, You Miao couldn't hang on any longer. He sprawled over his desk and passed out without a care for anyone else.

He didn't know how long he slept when suddenly, someone shook him, jolting him awake. The memorials to the throne on his desk were dampened by his drool, and the supervisory secretaries were all snickering.

"Wha–?" You Miao answered blankly.

A palace attendant replied, "His Majesty requests an audience, Lord You."

Without a choice, You Miao tidied up the books strewn about his desk and then stood to advise Sun Yu he was leaving before following the palace attendant out. It was already dusk when he emerged from the Administration Chamber. As the autumn breeze fluttered past, You Miao's head suddenly became impeccably clear. He thought about the new law and Li Zhifeng's army, and an idea suddenly came to mind.

"We've gone about it the wrong way from the start," You Miao told Zhao Chao.

Zhao Chao rubbed his deeply furrowed brow. "I wanted to issue an edict on the spot at court, but you wouldn't let me, and now we're back to square one. If we're gonna drag this on for another three or five months until spring next year, then won't everything just be the same as before?"

"No, no." You Miao immediately grinned. "I've got an idea. Take a look at the military reports first."

You Miao placed said report on the imperial desk for Zhao Chao to take a look. Right now, You Miao devious mind was full of devilish plans to knock out everyone—if things went smoothly, at least eight out of ten ministers at court would be calling in sick to the morning assembly.

"Li Zhifeng is here." You Miao drew a line, pointing out for Zhao Chao where Jiang Prefecture bordered Yan Prefecture. "The troops are deployed

here, and across from them is the Yellow-Robed General Tu Risheng's army."

"*Yellow-Robed* General? What a grand dream; to become the emperor, [1]" Zhao Chao scoffed.

You Miao didn't dare to comment on that subject and gestured at the map instead. "Tonight, I'll dispatch an urgent military order to have Li Zhifeng chase the rebel army here and reclaim the Jiang Prefectural Office somehow. Then tomorrow, during the morning assembly, issue an edict on the spot to summon Li Zhifeng back."

Startled, Zhao Chao exclaimed, "Are you out of your mind?!"

You Miao flashed a sly smile and waved dismissively. "Isn't Lin Zhengtao aggressively trying to impeach Li Zhifeng? When you summon Li Zhifeng back, throw him in jail and tell the court to pick another general to dispatch."

"There aren't any other generals we can send right now!" Zhao Chao exclaimed. "What are you thinking? Niu Xu, Huang Wenying, and Li Hao of the Yang Prefectural Army aren't capable enough to take this on by themselves... What do we do about the rebel army if we withdraw like this?"

"Have them stay put there," You Miao replied. "Then I'll write another letter to tell Nie-da-ge to go eighty miles westward. That way—"

He drew another line. The two lines representing the Yang Prefectural Army and the Northern Expedition Army flanked the area of unrest, leaving only an opening that led to the northwest of Yang Prefecture.

With a grin, You Miao said, "The swap between commanders will take at least two days' time. When the rebel army sees da-ge coming, they'll definitely withdraw southeastward. Two days is enough time for them to retreat to the west of Yang Prefecture.

"Then, after crossing another river, it'll be the Tang family's domain." You Miao threw the brush down. "If they refuse to accept the new law, they can send their own private soldiers to exterminate the bandits."

"..." Zhao Chao was speechless.

"Lock Li Zhifeng up and don't let him out, yeah?" You Miao said.

"You're too fucking evil," Zhao Chao said. "How can you turn this problem into a bargaining chip...? No, this will have to be properly thought out. What if the rogues charge into Yang Prefectural City?"

"I trust Li Zhifeng," You Miao said. "When the time comes, I'll supervise the army myself."

"It's an army of one hundred thousand men!" Zhao Chao exclaimed. "If the rebel army can't be stopped and they charge into Yang Prefectural City, we'll be done for."

"What are you afraid of?" You Miao asked. "We beat back the Xianbei and you're afraid of some citizens? Besides, the battle should never have needed to happen in the first place; they're all your people. Have the army garrison the south shore of Qing River, then send a minister over to promulgate the new law on the spot and distribute grain. That way, everyone will go home. And then you summon Tu Risheng to court to become an official and award him a title—"

"Are you kidding me?!" Zhao Chao blew up. "He wants to *kill me* and become the emperor himself, and you want me to award him a title?!"

Exasperated, You Miao said, "Bring him in first and see if he's useful. If not, then kill him. What comes after is up to you."

"No, absolutely not! How can you rebel and get an inheritable noble title out of it? It makes no sense!" Zhao Chao continued to protest.

"Well, figure it out yourself, then," You Miao said.

You Miao was exceptionally happy, giggling and proud. Meanwhile, Zhao Chao was pacing back and forth inside the hall, his head in a complete mess. You Miao helped himself to some desserts and chomped down on a few mung bean cakes while Zhao Chao remained in turmoil. Once done with the desserts, You Miao sipped on tea, then snapped his fan open and fanned himself a few times before abruptly charging in front of Zhao Chao. He stuck the fan against his nose, flashing it before him.

"..." Zhao Chao was speechless.

"Heh heh." You Miao chuckled and backed off. "Have you made up your mind? I'm going to write letters to Li Zhifeng and Xie Quan now."

Zhao Chao waved him off, motioning for him to be quiet. He went to sit at his desk, his mind wandering off in a daze. The sky darkened bit by bit until the palace attendant entered the room to light the lamps.

It took another hour before Zhao Chao said, at last, "You're very smart."

You Miao nodded cheerfully, looking at Zhao Chao expectantly.

"With this, the new law will *have to* change whether they like it or not," Zhao Chao said. "The reform can be enacted, and by spring next year, Jiangnan will be a completely different landscape. Besides, the whole thing

will be locked in if we announce the statute to the people—no one will be able to get out of it. But how can you guarantee Tu Risheng will listen to you without a fuss?"

"I've got my ways, naturally," You Miao replied.

"Fine, I'll trust you. You're not someone who'd speak without certainty," Zhao Chao acquiesced. "How are you going to get Nie-da-ge to move his troops southward, though? The imperial government won't allow him to move so randomly. If the Ministry of War issued the order to maneuver as soon as you're gone, the others will notice something off."

You Miao laughed. "Send him a secret order and tell him to go down south directly. If the court asks when the time comes, just say there are people from the rebel army exchanging information with the Di tribe, so spies are being hunted down for investigation."

When Zhao Chao didn't speak, You Miao urged him further, "Don't miss this chance, Your Majesty."

At last, Zhao Chao said resolutely, "Do it. I'll be staking my everything on it."

Immediately, You Miao pulled out a sheet of paper and wrote a letter to Li Zhifeng on the spot. He instructed him to usher the army toward Mount Bifeng, herd the refugees into the valley there, pressure them to enter the southernmost point of the plains of West Liang, and then stop to await further instructions. He also tagged on a reminder that if the imperial court sent anyone, to not make any objections and simply return to Yang Prefecture with the envoy.

Once done with the letter, You Miao stamped it with his personal seal and told Zhao Chao to stamp his imperial one before it was dispatched overnight.

The next day, You Miao didn't attend the morning assembly and Sun Yu continued to call in sick, so Tang Bo went. And then that same day, a messenger was sent to the Administration Chamber from the Ministry of War—for that entire Ministry had exploded.

"The Minister has requested you," the Vice Minister of War said.

You Miao frowned. "I can't get away. Just tell him to go with what His Majesty said to do."

The Vice Minister had no choice but to return, but in the afternoon, Ping Xi himself came over.

Inside the Administration Chamber, the supervisory secretaries all had their lips curled upward in what was obviously expressions of schadenfreude. When Ping Xi entered the hall, he cupped his hands and saluted Sun Yu.

"Lord Sun, this lower official wishes to have a few words with You Ziqian."

When Sun Yu nodded his consent, You Miao put his brush down and took Ping Xi to a secluded corner in the inner courtyard. He motioned for Ping Xi to wait a moment, then went to his own room. Ping Xi looked restless and agitated as he sat, and he went insane at last the moment he saw You Miao emerge with a tea set.

"What time do you think it is?! *And you're brewing tea*—!" he roared.

"*Shh*—sit down." You Miao hastily gestured for him to quiet down and flashed a sly smile.

Ping Xi's face changed, and he watched You Miao suspiciously.

"How did the morning assembly go?" You Miao asked. "I saw Tang Bo whispering to the others, but I didn't listen closely."

"It was absolute mayhem!" Ping Xi exclaimed. "His Majesty is transferring Li Zhifeng back. Did you piss him off last night? Go to the palace right now and plead for mercy; he eats up whatever you dish out."

You Miao answered with a light chuckle, to which Ping Xi shouted, "And you're still laughing! I've withheld the transfer papers; if not for you, then for the government. Swapping generals on the frontlines is a huge taboo! How can the fight even continue like this?"

"Who's the one currently dispatched for the mission?" You Miao asked.

"Tang Huaili," Ping Xi replied. "Originally the Deputy General from Jiao Prefecture, someone under the Tang family. Tang Xin was the one who nominated him, but I'm withholding the commander's seal and haven't given it to him yet. I'm afraid if he doesn't get it by tonight, he'll take the imperial edict directly to Li Zhifeng to take over his army."

"Then let him go. I'll take all the responsibility," You Miao said.

"My god, what are you thinking?" Ping Xi said helplessly. "That guy can, at most, maybe lead the naval fleet, but you're letting him go fight a battle that needs to force the surrender of a peasant army. Are you *asking* for a massacre?"

"That won't happen; Tu Risheng won't face him head-on," You Miao said. "Li Zhifeng has probably started to maneuver already."

Ping Xi was confused. You Miao did a mental calculation; the time should've been right, so he added, "Li Zhifeng is currently leading his troops to drive the rebel army into Mount Bifeng. Tomorrow, or the day after, when Tang Huaili reaches him to take over, the rebel army should make it to the plains."

"That won't do either. The north is General Nie's..." Ping Xi trailed off; he had controlled the Ministry of War for long enough to immediately understand the plan. He muttered, "You Miao, you've got balls. You want Tang Huaili to suffer a defeat before swapping Li Zhifeng back?"

"Heh heh. Just go back and release the commander's seal, and don't say anything," You Miao said.

Ping Xi mulled things over briefly before he slowly nodded.

After Ping Xi was sent off, You Miao returned to the hall to continue processing the memorials to the throne on his desk, appearing downcast. Tang Bo had been observing him all afternoon, and the two remained in the hall even after Sun Yu had left for the day.

"Lord You," Tang Bo started.

"There's no need to say anything." You Miao looked up and cast a glance at Tang Bo, flashing a quick, nonchalant smile. "Give it a few days. When all that needs to be done is done, I'll go home, work some fields, raise some fish. I won't stick around to keep asking for contempt here."

Tang Bo was visibly moved; he hadn't expected You Miao to already have the intention to withdraw, and he didn't know what to say for the moment.

"Lord You." Tang Bo reconsidered his words, then sighed. "I know Lord You doesn't wish to be friends with me."

"No, no," You Miao quickly responded with a smile. "You and I are both juniors of Jiangnan. Ever since I was young, I looked up to the child prodigy of Yi Prefecture; Lord Tang's great name. We should've become friends a long time ago, but alas, in this world...there are many things that don't follow the will of man."

Tang Bo heaved a sigh. You Miao tidied his things and stood up.

"Lord Tang. After I step down from my position, if you wish to visit the estate, I will of course welcome you with open arms."

Watching You Miao, Tang Bo gave a quick smile and nodded meaningfully.

By the time he exited the Administration Chamber, You Miao had been suppressing his laughter so hard that he was going to choke. Tang Bo was still unaware that he and Zhao Chao had played a secret hand, but thinking back on past happenings, You Miao did feel a little sad. Had it not been for their differences in circumstance, he could've made a friend out of Tang Bo. It was unfortunate that things had turned out this way.

That night, You Miao received a message from Li Yan: Tang Huaili had already departed to seize control of Li Zhifeng's army. The Son of Heaven was outraged and had summoned Li Zhifeng back from the frontlines. Even You Hange had caught wind of the matter and rushed to inform You Miao of it. You Miao sat with him and drank an entire evening's worth of tea, discussing the current political scene—to assure You Hange that he knew what he was doing.

"It might be good to go home and just work the fields," You Hange said. "You haven't gone home in a long time."

You Miao answered with a "mn," and You Hange added, "A few days ago, the messengers from home were saying that Yang Prefecture's lands continue to be barren, and starved citizens are everywhere, missing meals all the time. A lot of people have gathered outside the estate begging for food."

You Miao was surprised by this news. "Such a thing is happening?"

You Hange nodded. "Uncle Qiao knows your plate is full of troublesome matters at court, so he didn't let anyone tell you."

"How many people?" You Miao asked.

"Not too many. Maybe several thousand?" You Hange replied. "They just want to beg Uncle Qiao for a bite to eat, and to work the fields come spring. Uncle Qiao and our uncles from Liu Prefecture are thinking of ways to settle them. It's been almost half a month, so that should've been taken care of by now. You can also take this chance to go home and take a look for yourself."

You Miao nodded.

* * *

That night, after You Hange left, You Miao tossed and turned in his bed, unable to sleep from the excessive tea-drinking.

Another two days later, Li Zhifeng returned to Maocheng. As soon as he was back, he was arrested and taken to prison with not a single clue as to why. You Miao had been waiting for him there and bailed him out.

"Let's go."

Li Zhifeng was furious. "What is going on? Wait! I've still got something to say!"

"Don't bother," You Miao said. "I almost took up a blade and stabbed people at court myself. You're no match for those old farts in there, so blood would probably spill for real if you were to try arguing."

"They swapped me out from the frontlines!" Li Zhifeng exclaimed in rage. "Sending some guy who's never commanded a cavalry to take over the control of my regiment. And he looks down on me, too...*mph*!"

Li Zhifeng was flaming pissed, but his fire was extinguished at once when met with You Miao's kiss.

"Home time," You Miao said simply.

He paid up for a "bail first, interrogation later" sentence from the prison and got Li Zhifeng out. Rocking leisurely on a skinny horse, the two headed back to the estate. Along the way, Li Zhifeng listened to You Miao's explanation, and only then did he sort of understand the situation and nod.

"The letter to Nie-da-ge has already been dispatched," You Miao said. "We'll try to coax him just this once, and have him maneuver part of his forces down south to garrison the north shore of Hupao River and keep things in check. When Tang Huaili inevitably gets himself into a sorry plight, we'll get san-ge to dispatch you for a second time. I'll be going with you as well. With this, all the court ministers' mouths will be shut—whether it's the topic of the reform, or the charges against you."

"Who came up with this idea? That's too evil." Li Zhifeng was somewhat astonished.

"Me, of course. Who else?" You Miao laughed.

Li Zhifeng grinned and exhaled the last of his frustration. The pair rocked on that horse as they traversed the plains under the clear skies. The color of dusk was as red as blood. At last, they could finally rest for a while.

As they approached the estate, they saw campfires of various sizes all along the road, illuminating innumerous tents. The grounds were packed densely with people; a rather spectacular sight. The destitute folk were spread all over the meadows before Riverwave Estate; there were even

some who were cooking. Cheng Guangwu was patrolling the grounds with a squad.

"Shaoye!" Cheng Guangwu called out. "Shaoye is back!"

Every time You Miao returned, it was as if the entire estate was celebrating a festival; they were always so exuberant that it always made You Miao feel a little embarrassed.

"What are they doing?" he questioned with a frown. "Why are there so many people gathered outside?"

Riding in the front, Cheng Guangwu explained, "They're picking the husks of rice ears. Lord Uncle gave them permission. There are too many disaster victims, so during the day, the children are allowed into the estate to pick the husks left in the fields after the autumn harvest. There are bits of grain left in them, so they stew it outside the grounds."

You Miao thought letting things continue like this was far too sinful. "Did we open the granary?" he asked.

Cheng Guangwu shook his head. "Lord Uncle wants to wait a while longer, and only open the stores when the situation gets really bad."

Li Zhifeng spoke up, "How was the harvest?"

"The estate need not worry about food and clothing. Along with the land at Quan Mountain, we've harvested fifty-five granaries worth of grain this year!"

You Miao let out a sigh of relief. This year was the first harvest for the east and west ends of the estate. Each granary held a hundred bushels. With a harvest of over five thousand bushels for the spring and autumn harvests respectively, there was enough to feed Riverwave Estate for an entire lifetime.

You Miao had only just arrived at the manor when Qiao Jue personally came out to welcome him.

"I hear Li-xiong was swapped out from the frontlines in the middle of operations?" he asked.

Li Zhifeng gave Qiao Jue a rare smile. "There are always ups and downs; it's normal."

Qiao Jue nodded and consoled him, "It's good to come back and stay for a few days, too. Besides, winter is coming."

With a smirk, You Miao peered at Li Zhifeng askance. "We're just afraid it'll only be a few days before we have to toil again."

Li Zhifeng shook his head, resigned.

At dinner that evening, which had been set up by Qiao Jue, You Miao mentioned the people outside the estate. Qiao Jue agreed readily to stew porridge to provide relief to the starving folk, starting the next day. They would use the return of the young master as the reason, and do so in You Miao's name.

Upon rising the next day, all the people outside the estate gathered. Ten large cauldrons were set up inside the estate, and the charitable porridge-serving began. News of this spread like wildfire. Many from Liu Prefecture had lost their land and didn't have any money after moving south, so they had been waiting outside the estate. Now, they all swarmed to beg for porridge.

There were also many who went to You Miao to plead for a job at the estate. But since the estate was almost at capacity, he most he could promise them was that there would be no end to the free porridge—at least no one would be dying of hunger. As for field leases, they would have to wait until spring next year.

At the sight of the sea of people outside the estate, lined up in a long queue, Li Zhifeng sighed.

"How are the seeds for next spring?" You Miao asked.

"All prepared," Qiao Jue answered, taking out the ledger for You Miao to see.

You Miao click-clacked on his abacus. "Set aside three thousand bushels of grain for me."

"What do you need that much for?" Qiao Jue asked.

Three thousand bushels was enough to support even a whole army. Even then, You Miao felt it wasn't quite enough.

"The court will probably send word by the end of the tenth month for Li Zhifeng to return to the expedition. I'll need to haul at least a million pounds of grain over to distribute to the rebel army on the spot, in order to appease the angry mob."

Qiao Jue sighed. "A hundred thousand have died this year, at minimum. I just came back from Jiang Prefecture. Thank goodness we've got our own private soldiers, or else the road couldn't have been traveled at all."

You Miao listened as Qiao Jue recounted his journey. Two months ago, Qiao Jue went to Xichuan to purchase seeds for crops as well as rapeseed. All along the way, there were people cooking the flesh of their fellow humans—some even eating their own children.

Li Zhifeng frowned deeply as he listened. “I heard about that, too, when I went on the expedition.”

You Miao heaved a deep sigh. Beneath a thousand miles of clear moon, the Southern Dynasty was standing on shaky ground. Although Nie Dan was there to hold down the fort, natural and human disasters had been ceaselessly pummeling it. Sometimes, You Miao really was scared that Tianqi would simply just end—should Tianqi fall, what kind of life should he pursue?

Should he wander to the ends of the earth with Li Zhifeng? A brand-new dynasty would overtake the old, but if it was one controlled by the Tartars... You Miao shuddered at the mere thought of it. If that happened, he’d become a man without a home. Boyi and Shuqi refused to eat the meals granted by the Zhou;[2] You Miao could vaguely understand their melancholy.

“That won’t happen,” Li Zhifeng assured. “Tianqi won’t fall; there’s still so many people around.”

“So many people... When it’s time to die, they all will,” You Miao said.

“Only after I commanded an army did I come to understand why the Quanrong could never prosper,” Li Zhifeng said.

Something stirred in You Miao, and he looked at Li Zhifeng. “Why?”

Li Zhifeng replied after a moment of thought, “The Quanrong aren’t like you Hans. You Hans who read, and have so many smart people.”

You Miao laughed. “You think the Hans are smart? Sometimes, I actually think we’re a little *too* smart.”

Li Zhifeng nodded, but didn’t respond. He seemed to be sighing over the fate of Tianqi.

They were back at Riverwave Estate, again. Every time You Miao returned, he always felt as though this place and Maocheng were two different worlds—that Riverwave Estate was truly a paradise, separate from the outside. Those living at the estate didn’t know the depths of the internal strife that plagued the imperial court, what with the endless back-and-forth fighting, nor did they care what was happening beyond their domain. Every piece of news the estate received was brought back by the boy servants who traveled to and from the stores in Yang Prefectural City. Upon receipt of every fresh bit of news, they would chat excitedly for a long while, after which they would have tea, desserts, meals, and then inspect the fields. Qiao Jue would also take a few of them to pick tea in Jiangbei, and then

sun-dry and roast the leaves upon their return. During the off-season, the boy servants would get together and build kites to fly over the hills.

Shaowei, the youngest of the first era of boy servants, also possessed the nimblest hands, as his home village specialized in kitemaking. You Miao joined their party as soon as he returned to the estate. The sight of a dozen beautiful twenty-year-old men flying kites over the hills truly was a feast for the eyes.

During the day, You Miao would only rise after noon was past, and it would be afternoon soon enough once lunch was over. He would either take up a bamboo rod and follow Li Zhifeng to the lake to fish, or he would stroll along the river shore to catch crabs, or he would pick the river snails brought up by the waterwheel from the canal.

As autumn approached its end, so did rain gradually arrive. Nevertheless, the somber showers were tragically light; all that they brought was a wistful chill. The drought had passed, but to rain in this season, the temperature plummeted and added nothing but frost to snow. Many of those guarding the entrance of the estate waiting for their two meals a day fell ill from the cold. Without a choice, You Miao sent Li Zhifeng to invite a doctor to see to the sick. Those who had caught the flu were allowed into the manor to recuperate.

On rainy days, You Miao would draw and paint inside the manor, crafting small models of plows and machinery with which to play. Li Zhifeng took up the role of the carpenter, and sawed wood for him to use.

Life continued on thus until the third of the eleventh month, when news arrived from Maocheng. Yang Prefectural City was thrown into a panic—General Tang had missed an opportunity to fight, and a strong rebel force of one hundred thousand peasants calling themselves the “New Army” was coming down on Qing River. One more step, and they would enter Yang Prefectural City.

Yang Prefectural City was two hundred and twenty-four miles away from the prefectural border, and the first to bear the brunt of this reality was the Tang family; whose land in Ding County was in imminent danger of clan migration. Should Ding County be overtaken, the next in line was Chong County—the Lin family’s domain.

On the day he left, You Miao gave Sun Yu a heads up: since the reform couldn’t be worked out, he would depart and temporarily avoid the limelight. Sun Yu was taken aback at first, but he didn’t ask questions—for

he saw the mirth in You Miao's eyes. You Miao informed him that his leave of absence would be at least ten days, at most one month; but regardless, he would certainly return. Sun Yu had no questions after that. You Miao was sure that, once Tu Risheng's army started running, Sun Yu would understand his plan.

Sure enough, everything was progressing as he had expected and developing according to plan. When Nie Dan moved southward, the rebel army's leader Tu Risheng hadn't dared to provoke the wrath of the God of War. Truly, Nie Dan's military might was too great, not to mention he was the great nation-protecting general—even if Tu Risheng had ten balls, he wouldn't dare to open fire on Nie Dan. Thus, with the Northern Expedition Army ahead and the government's troops behind, the only option for the rebel army was to run southeastward.

You Miao knew that when the situation came to this point, Yang Prefectural City would be in danger if they didn't re-dispatch Li Zhifeng—which meant the imperial court would most certainly send someone to Riverwave Estate to grovel for Li Zhifeng and You Miao's return.

And yet in all of his calculations, You Miao had never thought that the one who'd come would be Tang Bo.

As he sat in the head seat in the main hall, You Miao's head swirled with millions of thoughts but not a single idea on where to even start. He wanted to laugh, but he shouldn't do it out loud; he had to arduously hold in his mirth, rubbing his forehead the one moment and pinching his nose the next, acting like a monkey.

Tang Bo took a sip of tea and commented mildly, "Good tea for good cups."

Li Zhifeng also said, mildly, "Home-grown. I enjoy drinking it as well."

They were enjoying the Riverwave Oolong matched with Ruyao ceramic-ware, and Tang Bo was full of praises. "The Sunshine-After-Rain cup. Could this be the set that Qiaoqi-gongzi used a hundred years ago?"

"Yes," You Miao replied with a smile. "When the Sage of Tea, Lu Yu, came for a tour of Jiangnan, he had tea thrice at Lord Qiaoqi's home and subsequently gifted the Qiao family this tea set. It became an heirloom. Later, when my mother married, she brought it as part of her dowry." He then said self-derisively, "Tang-gongzi comes from a great house with great enterprises. I haven't anything good to receive you with, and ordinary wares

aren't worth a hill of beans, so I've brought out Riverwave Estate's best tea set."

"So is it fake or authentic? Last time you said it was fake," Li Zhifeng asked.

The comment last time was something You Miao had said offhandedly to tease Li Zhifeng; he hadn't expected him to remember. You Miao burst out laughing and looked at him, grinning like he found him hilarious. Li Zhifeng was used to being the target of You Miao's playful jokes, so he only looked resigned.

"Always teasing me; is it really that fun?" Li Zhifeng said.

Still grinning widely, You Miao said, "Yes. Seeing how serious you get is the best."

Tang Bo shook his head resignedly as he watched the two flirt with each other. "Lord You does jest."

You Miao said seriously to Tang Bo, "To be honest to Tang-xiong, this set really is a fake. Although it was a gift from Lu Yu to the Qiao family, it's not authentic Ruyao. But my mom liked it, and it's got some character to it, so I've always kept it in my possession."

Now it was Tang Bo's turn to feel awkward. Li Zhifeng laughed heartily, unable to hold back.

Tang Bo nodded agreeably. "Since it's in Lord You's hands, it doesn't actually matter whether it's fake or authentic."

You Miao laughed. "That's the principle, but it's still up to Tang-xiong. If Tang-xiong says it's authentic, then it's authentic; if Tang-xiong doesn't care, then naturally, it's a fake."

Tang Bo could tell You Miao's words had underlying implications, so he didn't comment and simply nodded.

You Miao added, "I actually brewed a pot of tea for Hemetir once, in his tent. Hemetir said that the Hans are drunk on antiques and ancient wares—that it's no wonder we fell. I had dismissed his remark at the time; our Tianqi has the Four Books and Five Classics and possesses extensive knowledge and profound scholarship, so the words of a Barbarian are worthless. Yet looking at the here and now, there certainly is some truth to his words. A set of teapots and teacups might appear exquisite, but how can they compare to human lives?"

"Indeed," Tang Bo agreed gladly. "Just as you say—antiques, calligraphy and paintings, even gold and silver, they're all just material

goods. If they're thrown into a corner with no one to appreciate them, they're naught but a pile of wasted sundries."

This was a conversation that Li Zhifeng didn't understand, but You Miao and Tang Bo were both perfectly aware of what the other meant. A hundred thousand refugees were about to attack the Tang family's current location, and Tang Huaili was completely worn out. It would only be a few days before the Tang family would need to make their escape. No matter the greatness of their clan's enterprise, it was about to be laid to waste.

"If Tang-xiong has nothing going on tonight, then please stay for the night. You can sleep in the inner yard. There's a small bamboo courtyard in the back; the room is next to my little uncle's."

Tang Bo sighed. "Shen Garden's scenery is exceptional. Across all of Yang Prefecture, only a handful of courtyards can compare to You-xiandi's."

"You do flatter me," You Miao replied modestly. "I am simply reaping what the ancients have sown."

Keeping his empty cup, Tang Bo took out a case of tea and handed it to You Miao. He said, smiling, "This is the Autumn Dew that my family had me bring. Try some, You-xiandi."

You Miao laughed; he could finally join the gentry's juniors in intellectual pretension. "Well, now, this is a renowned tea, too; not any less so than our Beauty's Kiss."

"Far from it." Tang Bo didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "You-xiandi's tribute tea from the former Sunshower Tea Estate was one tael of gold for one tael of tea. It's unfortunate... Who knows when another tea plantation will flourish in Liu Prefecture again."

"There's no foreseeable end to the northern expedition," You Miao sighed. "I'm afraid it'll be difficult."

Tang Bo kept leading the subject to the warfront, but You Miao kept diverting the conversation and making things awkward for him. If only You Miao would follow along with Tang Bo and asked him for news of the current situation, or remarked on something about the warfront, Tang Bo could get to the point. Except You Miao kept dancing around the subject, making cryptic commentary from the periphery and giving Tang Bo such a hard time that he was now terribly anxious.

In the end, Tang Bo had to say subserviently, "Here is another painting that I also brought from home. Xiandi mentioned last time that I could

come visit should I find myself free. I hadn't known at first, but when I learned that you are the master of Shen Garden, I didn't dare bring anything ordinary for fear of appearing common..."

You Miao perked up, but was immediately stunned when he rolled the painting open.

"This, this, this..." You Miao stuttered, dumbfounded. "Is this the one that was hanging in the palace?"

What Tang Bo had gifted was, unexpectedly, a painting entitled "Nine Horses Upon the Spring Field" by a famous painter of a former dynasty. It was a piece that had once hung in the former study of the crown prince.

Tang Bo nodded, smiling. "This is the authentic piece. The one that was in the palace was an imitation, painted by the State Preceptor Zhang Xiaoxiao of the founding father's era."

This was an invaluable painting, yet Tang Bo had so simply given it away. Although You Miao didn't usually care for calligraphy and paintings, he nevertheless knew the value of these refined objects—it wouldn't do for him to keep making things difficult for Tang Bo after this gift.

"Thanks so much, Tang-xiong," he said.

Tang Bo then pointed out the seal stamps at the bottom of the scroll, teaching You Miao how to differentiate authentic pieces from forgeries. You Miao nodded repeatedly as he listened, feeling nothing but respect.

"You-xiandi's golden bowl still remains at the Administration Chamber," Tang Bo said, grinning. "I wonder when xiandi will return?"

You finally get it, You Miao thought. Just as well; Tang Bo had always been an intelligent man. When You Miao left, he didn't take his golden bowl with him; it was only logical that Tang Bo knew You Miao's retirement was temporary, and that he knew You Miao would return sooner or later. Nevertheless, never in a million years would the others have thought You Miao to be this ruthless.

"I'll go back in a few days," You Miao relented. Tang Bo had already come to him willingly to admit defeat and to invite them back, so You Miao stopped being impish and got straight to the point. After all, under the present circumstances, they were technically in the same camp.

"How are things at court?" Li Zhifeng asked.

Tang Bo responded with a heavy sigh. "Everything requires speed; we don't know what else is going to change. Tu Risheng's band of miscreants is currently at the north shore of Qing River. One more step, and they will

enter the borders of Yang Prefecture. The Yang Prefectural Army is split in two: one is going southward on the Ancient Tea Horse Road and the other is returning to Mao County. Debates at court are heated and endless."

Li Zhifeng took a sip of tea and hummed for a moment before turning to You Miao. "We'll go back tomorrow morning?"

Answering with a casual "mn," You Miao looked at him appraisingly. *Can't tell usually, but you're a pretty responsible guy, huh?* he thought, finding it funny in spite of himself. He hadn't expected Li Zhifeng to be concerned.

"Can we go back to court today?" Tang Bo asked.

Both You Miao and Li Zhifeng were taken aback—was Tang Bo really in that much of a hurry? But then again, he wasn't wrong. Military matters were as urgent as putting out fires; even a day of delay wasn't permissible.

"Sure." You Miao nodded readily. "We'll get changed and go."

[Chapter 48]

Deep in the night, You Mao and Li Zhifeng made their return with Tang Bo and headed straight for the palace. You Miao didn't wait for their presence to be announced before he crossed the gates, but as he passed the side hall with the fully-armored Li Zhifeng, he unconsciously peered inside. The room was packed with a number of ministers.

Tang Xin and Lin Zhengtao were waiting in the side hall, along with a bunch of civil officials—all of whom were from the Jiangnan families of Lin, Tang, and Xie. Surprisingly, even Li Zhifeng's Army Supervisor Xie Quan was there. You Miao stopped in his stride and flashed the group a smile.

"Greetings, my lords," You Miao said, giving them a nod of his head.

When Tang Xin and his cadre saw You Miao, their expressions turned complicated as they nodded back in greeting. You Miao quietly figured that these guys hadn't a clue what was going on just yet—if they found out about his and Zhao Chao's ploy, they'd eat them both alive. He didn't say anything, lest he gave himself away, and only waved Xie Quan over. The two met in the corridor and then proceeded to the imperial study together.

"Why are you back?" You Miao asked.

"I was returned ten days ago. Tang Huaili swapped me out, too," Xie Quan replied.

Feeling resigned, You Miao figured that this was another order from the imperial court. He signaled him. "Stay behind me. In a minute, when we see His Majesty, you don't need to say anything."

Xie Quan nodded. Upon their arrival at the imperial study, You Miao pushed the door and entered. Zhao Chao was seated inside with Political Advisor Sun, the Minister of War Ping Xi, and the Minister of Revenue Xie Hui standing before his desk.

"Back?" Zhao Chao said.

You Miao nodded. Li Zhifeng gave a slight bow in greeting, and then without a word, he stood down to the side and started to flip through the military reports.

"This old subject will take his leave first," Sun Yu said.

Zhao Chao gave a nod of consent, and Sun Yu left. You Miao hastily approached to send him off, but Sun Yu waved him away, signaling with his

eyes that You Miao should remain.

"Li Zhifeng. Tomorrow morning," Zhao Chao started, heaving a sigh, "we've no choice but to dispatch you for the expedition. You Miao, you will accompany the army."

Li Zhifeng answered with a "mn," sounding as if he had already expected this.

Xie Hui spoke up, "The Ministry of Revenue hasn't collected all the necessary grain for disaster aid. Instead, will Lord You bring an edict to announce that the food will be distributed on the twenty-fifth of the eleventh month at the latest?"

"Your Majesty, I wish to nominate someone to return to the position of Li Zhifeng's Army Supervisor. I still have some arrangements to make. If all goes well, then perhaps we won't need to use a single soldier to settle the Yellow-Robed Army revolt."

Zhao Chao stared at You Miao, and You Miao took a step to the side to reveal Xie Quan behind him.

You Miao added, "I believe Xie Quan's ability is sufficient to assist the Yang Prefectural Army."

Li Zhifeng nodded. "I also nominate Xie Quan."

After a moment's hesitation, Zhao Chao pulled out a document that had been buried under a stack of reports, then burned it over the candle. "Fine. Xie Quan, you will be the Army Supervisor."

Quiet blanketed the study, and You Miao hummed, not saying a word. That was when Xie Hui realized there might be more that this pair of ruler and subject wanted to say to each other, and sensibly took his leave.

As soon as Xie Hui was gone, Zhao Chao said, "You Miao, the Administration Chamber will push for the reform at the morning assembly tomorrow. Once the resolution is passed in court, it will be handed to the Hanlin Academy for drafting. The prerequisite for such action is that it will successfully quell the unrest in northwest Yang Prefecture. Take absolute care when attending to it all. Our everything is staked on this."

"You don't believe I can win?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao laughed. "It's already near morning, now. Hand over the military tally first, and Xie Quan will go make preparations."

"There are only twelve thousand men left in the Yang Prefectural Army, of which only ten thousand can be allocated to you right now. Take the troops to Qing River and you can incorporate Tang Huaili's army of ten

thousand. But this way, there will only be two thousand left to defend Yang Prefectural City...” Zhao Chao said, handing over the tally.

“It’s enough,” Li Zhifeng answered, taking the tally without sparing it a glance and stuffing it into his robes. He gave You Miao a look, quirking his eyebrow, and questioned with his eyes, *Are you coming with me?*

“No, you and Xie Quan depart with the troops first tonight, and garrison Qing River’s south shore. I’ll come right after I’m done with preparations,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng nodded and left with Xie Quan in tow, leaving only You Miao and Zhao Chao in the study. Zhao Chao had obviously gone through a fierce battle with the ministers tonight and looked half-dead with exhaustion.

“If the gentry finds out about this, they’ll eat us alive for sure,” he said.

Caught between laughing and crying, You Miao said, “I was just thinking that. Thankfully, not too many people know, and those who’ve guessed don’t dare speak.”

You Miao paced back and forth; presently, almost all of his and Zhao Chao’s schemes had succeeded, and they had now come to the most important part: the reform, plus a victory in battle.

“Tang Xin and the others are still waiting in the side hall,” You Miao said. “You’re not going to see them?”

“Leave them,” Zhao Chao said. “A Minister of Public Works and a Censor-in-Chief have no right to speak on this matter aside from pleading on their clans’ behalf; they’re in no position to make decisions. We’ll bring up the plans in detail at tomorrow’s morning assembly.”

“It’s almost daybreak,” You Miao pointed out.

Zhao Chao stood up and fixed his dragon robes. “Then let’s get ready for court. Hopefully, in the ages to come, our descendants won’t judge us to be a foolish ruler and his sycophant subject.”

You Miao laughed. “Well, I never really cared about that. *Even as your body and fame fade from existence, ten thousand years the river flows on in persistence.*[3]”

Zhao Chao laughed heartily. “You’re absolutely right. Seems I’m the one taking things too seriously. Let’s go!”

* * *

On the fourth of the eleventh month, the debate on policy at court went amazingly smoothly. No one questioned why You Miao was back, nor did anyone mention the twelve charges against Li Zhifeng. Throughout the entire morning assembly, they had only gone in circles around one subject —the new law. Whether Tu Risheng's uprising could be quelled after the new law was promulgated was also a point of discussion.

This time, You Miao had come prepared with well-founded arguments, answering each and every one of Tang Xin and his cadre's questions. In the end, they finally conceded. Zhao Chao issued a decree on the spot, and told You Miao to wait for the Hanlin Academy's final draft before taking it with him to announce it before the frontlines at Qing River.

However, one person raised doubts today—surprisingly, it was the Minister of Revenue Xie Hui.

Xie Hui waited until You Miao had summarized his statement before he voiced his question. "Your Majesty, Lord You, please do not fault this old man for asking, but what comes next if promulgating the new law does not resolve the tension in the Qing River region?"

"That won't happen. I guarantee it with my life," You Miao replied.

It was deathly silent inside the court, and You Miao turned back to Zhao Chao. "I have confidence in the absolute success of our mission to offer amnesty to the rebels. I am willing to make a military pledge to Your Majesty and my lords present—should the mission fail, I will offer my own head."

Xie Hui nodded slowly. "In that case, we shall await Lord You's good news."

Tang Xin and the other ministers bore ashen faces, as they hadn't slept the night before; choked with worries as they were. By now, everyone was tired. After the assembly was dismissed, You Miao had a brief conversation with Ping Xi and learned of the frequent military reports which had completely worn out the entire imperial court over the past month.

As he was also feeling a little sleepy, You Miao's head was heavy when he emerged from the palace hall, but Xie Hui's call made him pause in his step.

You Miao said gladly, "What a coincidence. I've got some business to discuss with Lord Xie, so now I won't need to make a trip to the Ministry of Revenue."

“If there is anything Lord You needs, please do not hesitate to tell me. His Majesty has already instructed the Ministry of Revenue to fully cooperate for this battle. Food provisions will be dispatched before the army, and everything has already been prepared for General Li.”

Xie Hui then nodded, and forever tepid in his demeanor, he beckoned You Miao to speak.

After a brief contemplation, You Miao realized Xie Hui surely had seen through the schemes. With no reason to beat around the bush now, he got straight to the point.

“Sir, will you please disburse the disaster relief grain to me in advance? I will order the troops to escort it to the Qing River, along with the military provisions.”

Xie Hui narrowed his eyes, and looked troubled as he considered the request. “Does His Majesty know about this?”

“No, but I will have my teacher report it,” You Miao answered.

Xie Hui vaguely guessed You Miao’s intentions. “Lord You, are you thinking of...”

You Miao flashed a smile. “I will distribute the grain to the rebel army and have them disperse on the spot, send everyone home.”

Xie Hui frowned. “This is a very risky move, Lord You. If the mob is insatiable...”

“That won’t happen,” You Miao said, shaking his head. “After promulgating the new law and distributing the food, who’d dare keep up the revolt? Besides, with Li Zhifeng’s ability, those who continue to rebel can be crushed in an instant.”

Xie Hui sighed. “But the unrest in the Jiang Prefecture region has gone on for a long time now. The rebel army pillaged and plundered; the local gentry clans deserve an apology at least.”

“There will be no such thing,” You Miao said apathetically. “It’s not the people’s fault, so why should the gentry clans receive an apology?”

Xie Hui appeared startled, and You Miao added, “Today’s unrest wouldn’t have happened if the ministers had listened to the Lord Political Advisor’s plan for reform.”

Xie Hui let out a sigh in response, and could only nod. “Have the Administration Chamber draft the order. I will take an inventory of the disaster relief grain this afternoon.”

“Mn. I will distribute the grain that was previously collected. Whatever is collected later should be kept and distributed as relief to the peasants.”

After a moment of thought, Xie Hui chuckled. “Lord You is capable.”

You Miao smiled, but didn’t respond; he figured Xie Hui was now aware of his plans.

Xie Hui gave You Miao a long, calculating look, then said, “In the twelfth month of this year, a plum blossom viewing will be hosted at the Xie family’s gardens per Yang Prefecture’s customs. Might Lord You and General Li grant me the honor of accepting this invitation?”

You Miao could guess Xie Hui’s motives without thinking—he was trying to marry off his niece. Social networking events like these were very popular among gentry clans during peaceful times in Jiangnan. Since this was an invite extended to both himself and Li Zhifeng, it would be improper to decline.

“Once we return with victory, we will be sure to go and make ourselves a nuisance,” You Miao replied with a nod.

Delighted, Xie Hui nodded in return and the two parted ways at Wumen Gate.

You Miao headed back to the Administration Chamber first, but as Sun Yu was still napping, he took a small nap for himself as well. Yet as soon as he closed his eyes, time was lost; it was already dusk by the time he woke. Someone from the army camp came to report that Li Zhifeng had already set off, and Xie Quan had sent a memo telling You Miao to catch up to them along with the military food provisions at once. Thus, he personally went to the Ministry of Revenue with the written order to acquire the disaster relief grain. Li Yan, the Hanlin Academician, also came by, and the two stood outside the Ministry of War taking inventory of the military food provisions.

“So much food. If all this had been released for disaster relief a long time ago, we wouldn’t have all these issues,” Li Yan commented.

You Miao gave him a look. “I’m taking all this with me to distribute for relief.”

Li Yan froze. “If you give out the military rations, what will your boyfriend’s soldiers eat?”

“The soldiers won’t be fighting,” You Miao said with a laugh. “I’m going there with the rations and the statement. We’ll be coming back right after the decree is promulgated, and the food distributed.”

“You little bastard; getting ballsier by the day, aren’t you? What if they don’t submit?” Li Yan said, alarmed.

You Miao smiled, but didn’t respond; he only stared at Li Yan. Li Yan heaved a sigh and shook his head.

“I’ve a favor to beg of you.” Li Yan handed You Miao the charter of the new law.

“What do you want me to say to His Majesty?” You Miao asked after taking a glance at the document.

“On the twenty-third of the twelfth month, the imperial court will be sending an emissary to General Nie’s camp to negotiate with the remaining four Barbarian tribes.” When You Miao gave a nasal acknowledgment, Li Yan added, “I want to go. I want to see if I can get my wife back. The situation in the north is also unstable; the Barbarians and the Tartars are engaged in internal strife. Hopefully there will be an opportunity for us to seize and reclaim the Central Plains.”

“Isn’t that already your job? What, scared I’ll steal it?” You Miao said.

Resigned, Li Yan said, “It’s not so much that I’m scared this job will be given to you. His Majesty treasures you so freaking much; why would he let you run off to the Barbarian camps to negotiate peace? It’s simply that many here in Yang Prefecture have their eyes on the job. They don’t know how to interact with the Five Barbarian Tribes or the Tartars; they didn’t escape from enslavement like we did, after all. If one of those young masters from the Tang or Lin families gets the position, the business will probably go sour.”

You Miao nodded. “Done. Wait ’til I’m back from the expedition, and I’ll go talk to Zhao...His Majesty.”

Li Yan whispered into his ear, “Don’t underestimate him. These are my heartfelt words, and I’m telling you now. Everything that happens after this will be very hard to predict. Stand firmly on solid ground.”

You Miao gave a “mn.” He knew Li Yan was hinting at the complicated relationship between the former emperor and the new emperor that would begin to fester if a peace treaty was signed; he was telling him to stay on guard and be careful. Li Yan really was keeping him in his thoughts.

That night, with torches in hand, the men loaded all the military rations and the seven thousand bushels of disaster relief grain from the Ministry of Revenue. Adding to the count was the three thousand bushels of grain You Miao had released from Riverwave Estate’s own granaries, which brought

the total to twenty thousand bushels. It became evident that one troop would not be enough to transport this haul, so You Miao had to tell Ping Xi to allocate more soldiers to help escort all the food.

Li Zhifeng's army had already reached the frontlines, and the sight of their tents speckled along Qing River's shore greeted You Miao when he arrived on the third day. The river's water level was shallow in the winter, only about knee-deep, and the temperature was gradually dropping. To keep warm, Tu Risheng's men had built fires along their side of the river, and behind them were endless wooden shacks; so many that they reached all the way to the main roads.

Ever since the day You Miao had learned that the rebel army had set up camp on the north shore and wasn't recklessly moving southward, he knew Tu Risheng's troops wouldn't dare to march to Maocheng. Although he was the head of the rebel army, Tu Risheng knew the weight of things. After all, since the founding of Tianqi two hundred years ago, there had never been a point where they had incurred the wrath of God and the resentment of the people. With the current situation as it was, everyone knew there were external foes waiting on the sidelines. Overthrowing the government might very well mean the annihilation of the entire Southern Dynasty.

The timing really was not the best for a revolt right now, and Tu Risheng's own circumstances were incredibly awkward. This uprising was nothing more than a fight for a bite to eat, yet now that they'd fought all the way to the northwest of Yang Prefecture—with only one step left before facing the imperial court—the rebellion had suddenly transformed into an irrevocable commitment, with neither advancement nor retreat as an option. Even if they did overthrow Zhao Chao, what more could they do? Setting aside the matter of whether the rebel army even had the combat ability to do so, even if Tu Risheng was able to overtake Maocheng, Nie Dan would no doubt move southward to stamp him out, at which point the Five Barbarian Tribes and the Tartars would surely take advantage of the opportunity to invade Jiangnan.

Should that happen, Tu Risheng would go down in history bearing a damnable name.

Sometimes, despite the people's outcries and resentment, no one would dare to actually overthrow the ruling emperor—because what they needed was, in fact, a government. You Miao was absolutely certain of this point. He knew that once he provided Tu Risheng with a way out of this

predicament and gave everyone a bite to eat, the rebel army would disperse on its own.

When You Miao arrived at the army camp, Li Zhifeng was pouring over maps and Xie Quan was in negotiations with the rebel army at the north shore. You Miao was delighted; he indeed did not misjudge Xie Quan. There was a reason why Ping Xi and the others favored him. Of all the ministers in the imperial court, only three were gutsy enough to dare enter an enemy camp solo for negotiations: one was Li Yan, one was Xie Quan, and one was You Miao himself.

* * *

As the sun sank in the west, Li Zhifeng and You Miao were sitting by the river, each with a bowl in hand, eating while watching the other shore.

"Xie Quan and I have decided—if he isn't back by tonight, I will launch a night raid," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao teased him, "You can bully the Tartars all you want, but look at the folks over there. All they have in their hands are hoes and sickles; they don't even have chevaux-de-frises set up in their camp. Do you really have the heart to cut them down?"

Li Zhifeng didn't respond and only shook his head, resigned.

Nonetheless, that was fact. You Miao had surveyed Tu Risheng's camp arrangement. Had the mission been given to himself and Li Zhifeng, a night raid wouldn't have even been necessary; they could've simply beat the drums thrice in broad daylight and opened with a direct charge; the other party would be completely annihilated. While the rebel army consisted of a hundred thousand men, they'd dissolve into a disorderly mob if they came face to face with real soldiers. Moreover, since they were mostly half-starved disaster victims, what energy did they have to fight?

"We'll see when Xie Quan returns. If the talk falls through, I'll go over myself. I've got the imperial edict ready and everything," You Miao said.

"We can't underestimate the enemy," Li Zhifeng cautioned. "The other camp does have an expert. Otherwise, Tang Huaili wouldn't have suffered such a miserable defeat."

"What expert?"

"An expert at combat and directing troops."

Li Zhifeng sketched out the previous military proceedings and explained to You Miao the reasons for Tang Huaili's miserable defeat. You Miao had thought the cause was due to Tang Huaili being a last-minute swap, but Li Zhifeng's analysis made him realize that Tu Risheng's army indeed had someone who knew how to battle.

"At the time, they detoured around Mount Tu and were going to outflank the rebels from the north of Qing River," Li Zhifeng explained. "But the rebels had deduced Tang Huaili's plan beforehand. They left various impedimenta behind and rushed to occupy the shore first. Tang Huaili's past experience was as a navy commander; he isn't an expert in hillside battles, so he ended up making the wrong judgment in the situation —he built camp on high ground and allowed himself to be trapped by fires set in the lower hills, sending him running away in utter defeat."

"And how does the man in the enemy camp compare to you?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng shook his head. "He's not my match, but still a considerably talented general. If he can be recruited to join the imperial court, then maybe he can be of use."

You Miao nodded slowly. "The key to this battle is whether Tu Risheng wants to fight. Others' opinions can be disregarded."

"Which is why we have to use force if softer tactics don't work. But even then, we mustn't let our guards down."

"Mn."

You Miao was still in contemplation when a soldier came to report that Xie Quan had returned.

"He's heard of you," were the first words Xie Quan said to You Miao.

Shocked, You Miao asked, "Heard what of me?"

"He wants you to go over to talk, but I rejected him," Xie Quan said. "His Majesty has already instructed before dispatch that we are not, in no uncertain terms, allowed to let you into the enemy camp."

You Miao laughed, while Xie Quan summoned a messenger from Tu Risheng inside. The man was barefoot and dressed in a cotton shirt; dark-skinned with an honest demeanor.

"You're Riverwave Estate's master?" he asked bluntly as soon as he entered.

You Miao nodded. "Go ahead and sit, but I won't receive you with tea. I'm sure you've heard of how the estate has been offering charitable

porridge for disaster relief."

The messenger nodded. He was silent and contemplative for a moment before he spoke again, "So many landlords in Jiangnan, but they're all fucking swine!"

"What's that?!" Li Zhifeng snapped.

The curse had included You Miao, but the messenger turned around and added with a smile, "Except the You family, who are still considerably sensible."

You Miao was aware that Qiao Jue's efforts over the years had earned his nephew quite a reputation. Whether it was the great flood of the year before or this year's great drought, Riverwave Estate had done a great deal for Yang Prefecture—and as a result, its name resounded far and wide; reaching Jiang, Yi, and other nearby prefectures. If You Miao went to speak with those rebel peasants, most of whom had come from tenant farmer backgrounds, he certainly wouldn't be seen with as much contempt as, say, Tang Bo and the rest.

"Many thanks for General Tu's high praise," You Miao mumbled. He was staring at the messenger—this whole time, he'd felt something was off.

The messenger stopped the niceties and took a seat, wiping his feet without a care. "Boss said to tell you to go over and have a chat with him," he said without looking up. "Do you dare?"

You Miao quirked his lips, not answering. A strange thought came to him, almost like a gut feeling—could this man be Tu Risheng himself?

Li Zhifeng responded instead, "Not possible. Who do you think you are?"

The messenger flashed a smile, appearing quite amicable. Staring at him, Li Zhifeng continued, "No matter how strong Tu Risheng might be, is he stronger than Hemetir? We've already fought the Xianbei and the Tartars. Why would we be afraid of you?

"He can come over to us if he wants. If not, we'll open fire tomorrow," Li Zhifeng concluded coldly. "But if you want Lord You to meet across the river? *Im-pos-si-ble*."

The messenger replied, sounding resigned, "As expected, all officials are the same. At first, we thought a Yang Prefecture local official would come. We didn't expect it would be Lord You, and we certainly didn't expect Lord You would be no different from the other corrupt officials.

Truth is, Master You—someone requested to meet you, sir. An old acquaintance of yours."

"What's his name?" You Miao questioned.

"You'll find out if you come," answered the messenger.

You Miao's eyebrows creased. He frowned as he tried to think of who he was acquainted with in Jiangnan—but no matter how much he racked his brains, he couldn't recall anyone. Could it be a distant relative? No; there was no way anyone from the You family would join the peasant army. He quietly studied the messenger, feeling odder by the minute. He stared so hard that the messenger averted his eyes and looked away.

"I admit that I'm no honest official," You Miao said.

Xie Quan's face dropped slightly, his brows furrowing. He obviously thought that You Miao was revealing too much in front of the peasant soldier. However, You Miao raised his hand and continued.

"But I never cared to rob any bit of money from the people. How about this: take the edict back with you and show it to your leader."

You Miao took out Zhao Chao's imperial edict. "A reform will be enacted in Jiangnan. By spring next year, you will all have fields to till. The Son of Heaven has ascended the throne; he understands the people's sentiments. He understands that no one has it easy. I'll give your leader one night's time. At dawn tomorrow, we'll each send out a small boat and meet at the center of the river. Tell Tu Risheng to meet me."

When the messenger reached for the edict, You Miao added, "His Majesty has personally said that as long as wrongs are admitted and rectified, all past incidents shall be forgiven."

"My words don't matter. General Tu will have to pass judgment on this," the messenger said cheerfully.

Xie Quan was about to take the edict and pass it on You Miao's behalf, but You Miao placed it in the messenger's hand directly and whispered next to his ear, "Tell Tu Risheng to be sensible; that this is his last and only chance. Li Zhifeng isn't like those spineless cowards from the Tang family. He's fought on the battlefields of the northern border..."

The messenger froze, and You Miao added, "Besides, he's not a Han. There'll be no mercy when killing you peasant soldiers. General Tu, forgive my unpleasant words, but if you don't withdraw, you will lose this battle. And after it's over, a condemned name awaits you. It's not worth it."

After his speech, he gave the messenger a light pat on the shoulder and let him go.

At daybreak the next day, a small boat sailed to the center of the river. On the south shore, Li Zhifeng and his great army stood with their swords drawn and ready.

Protected by several soldiers, You Miao boarded the other boat via a plank. The one sitting in the boat was indeed the messenger who had visited the camp the day before—the leader of the rebel army, Tu Risheng.

"Ha ha ha—!" Tu Risheng laughed heartily and welcomed You Miao. "Please have a seat, Master You."

You Miao did just that—and cheerfully, too. He was acting like he was not an enemy to Tu Risheng, but rather, an old friend.

"So how much has General Tu considered?" You Miao asked.

Tu Risheng sighed. He knew that Li Zhifeng's great army was bearing down upon him and that he could neither retreat nor advance. You Miao giving him this chance, and the fact he was letting him go was already giving him a lot of face.

He locked eyes with You Miao and said, unhurriedly, "Master You, I have something to ask of you. I can only make my decision after the question is answered."

You Miao grunted, and Tu Risheng unrolled the imperial edict.

"By the grace of His Majesty, reform in Jiangnan will be enacted and equal fields will be distributed for tilling next year in consideration of the people. However, I don't know what will become of the brothers who have followed me in this uprising."

Without hesitation, You Miao promised him, "Since His Majesty sent me and not any other officials, it implies I have full authority to take charge. General Tu, I can guarantee with my life that as long as you come back to Maocheng with me, no danger will befall your brothers, and there won't be any need to fear the government bending the law for the sake of revenge."

Tu Risheng fell deeply silent.

"If you don't trust me, there's no one left in the world to trust," You Miao added with a wry smile.

After a long, difficult mental battle, Tu Risheng finally made his decision and nodded. Then he said, "There is another request."

"By all means, speak freely," You Miao said.

He appraised Tu Risheng, knowing that he wanted to request that his life be spared. After all, he was the one who started this peasant uprising; no rebel leaders throughout history had ever escaped the fate of decapitation.

Tu Risheng pulled his head back and took a swig of wine, then sighed. His answer, however, was unexpected. “The brothers who have followed me thus far still don’t have a single bite to eat for their families. If they return to their villages, they’ll probably suffer abuse from the country gentry...”

What he said was certainly outside of You Miao’s expectations, and You Miao couldn’t help but mentally give him a thumbs-up. He thought, *What a great man—thinking so little of his own life at a time like this. Instead, it’s his subordinates he’s worried about.*

Nevertheless, You Miao remained tight-lipped on the surface. He replied impassively, “I can’t promise anything in regards to that. However, I will do my best to have the government deliver relief aid.”

Upset clouded Tu Risheng’s face, and he demanded, “The Jiangnan people only revolted for a bite to eat. And even now that we’ve reached this point, you still can’t guarantee it?!”

“Do you think the government is *pretending* to be ignorant of your suffering?” You Miao countered. “His Majesty’s situation—our situation—is much more difficult than yours! The imperial court has also become a battlefield, and His Majesty is leading a life of extreme frugality. The levied grain hasn’t arrived yet; there’s nothing you can do about it, even if you’re anxious.”

When Tu Risheng only sighed in response, You Miao added drily, “I will find a way to assemble disaster relief. But remember that relief aid is an allowance from the government, not a term for negotiation.”

When it came to negotiations with Tu Risheng, You Miao knew that he absolutely must not promise anything definite. If a term was granted but something unexpected came up—like the grain not being delivered as promised, or if there wasn’t enough—it would look as though the emperor had broken his promise. That would be detrimental to their aim to gain Jiangnan’s support.

Without a choice, Tu Risheng relented. “Then will Lord You please announce the decree to the public, so my men can see a reasonable conclusion to their efforts.”

You Miao nodded, knowing that this matter was finally resolved—and without shedding a single drop of blood.

At noon that day, Tu Risheng raised a high platform by the river. Xie Quan mounted the stage and announced the decree to the densely packed crowd of peasant soldiers below. They stood in stark contrast to the empty plains north of the Qing River. No one spoke, and no one left.

"Don't hurry away." After the announcement was over, You Miao ordered, "Release the grain!"

The news spread like wildfire, and the entire area north of the river was in an uproar. Working alongside the army, Li Zhifeng transported the grain from the other shore as Tu Risheng gawked, tongue-tied.

"This is the grain His Majesty told me to bring, along with the army," You Miao explained. "Perhaps this can relieve everyone's hunger for the time being."

The first man dropped to his knees with tears streaming down his face as he mumbled, "Long live the emperor."

Soon after, more and more men fell to their knees, prostrating to the south. They loudly cried "Long live the emperor." Their earth-shattering chorus of voices stretched for miles on end.

The Yang Prefectural Army distributed grain until deep into the night—one bag of rice per person, and those who had collected their grain went home for the winter. That night, as You Miao strolled along the river, he noticed Tu Risheng standing among the reed bushes. The man seemed deep in thought.

As the head of the rebel army, Tu Risheng had to be taken back to the capital; You Miao wouldn't be able to justify any other course of action. And according to law, the man's head had to roll. You Miao stood to the side and watched him—worried the man might seek his own death, and in doing so, make trouble for You Miao when it came time to report the mission.

In the end, You Miao approached him. "Tu Risheng."

Tu Risheng turned his head and flashed You Miao a smile.

"Though you've committed a heinous crime, I genuinely admire you," You Miao said. "You're a real man, General Tu."

Darkly-tanned with an honest demeanor, Tu Risheng carried a farmer's generosity and a scholar's mannered bearing. "Is Lord You perhaps afraid I'm thinking of taking my own life?"

“I don’t think you would,” You Miao replied cheerfully. “See how I didn’t send anyone to lock you up or follow you? I know you’re not someone who’d demean himself like that.”

Tu Risheng laughed. “If I committed suicide, it might be a good thing for you—or even for myself. Considering His Majesty’s temper, I’ll only get you in trouble when we return.”

You Miao understood what Tu Risheng meant—since he had made a promise to Tu Risheng, he might have to beg Zhao Chao for mercy on behalf of the leader of the surrendered rebel army. However, Tu Risheng had practically overturned everything in coming here; crushing two entire prefectures along the way. The civil court officials, especially the major gentry clans, would never forgive him. Zhao Chao wouldn’t let him off easily, either. Begging for mercy would place You Miao in an extremely awkward position.

“Not necessarily,” You Miao said with a breezy smile.

“What kind of man to you think the current emperor is?” Tu Risheng asked.

You Miao squinted his eyes, pondering, and didn’t respond. Now that he thought about it, it would seem that not even he quite understood Zhao Chao. What kind of man was Zhao Chao? Perhaps no one could answer this question. He had always felt that the Zhao Chao he knew was only one of the many Zhao Chaos sitting upon the throne.

Who understood him, then? Maybe Nie Dan, but not the best of anyone. After all the back and forth, it seemed the only one in all of Tianqi who could truly be said to understand Zhao Chao was You Miao. From the moment You Miao gave Tu Risheng his promise, he could predict the series of reactions that would come after bringing the man back to court—if You Miao begged for mercy, Zhao Chao would not kill Tu Risheng; the man wasn’t malicious, sly, or paranoid. But in order to suppress the court officials’ objections, Zhao Chao would send Tu Risheng to death row; to be executed come next year. After some time passed, he would think of a way to release the man and make use of him.

“He...deeply appreciates those who are endowed,” You Miao replied.

“Endowed in skill? Or money?” Tu Risheng asked.

You Miao laughed. “Don’t you worry, His Majesty won’t kill you.”

Tu Risheng sighed. “It doesn’t matter if this life of mine is saved or discarded; saving it is useless, anyway. If I can rescue the Jiangnan people

from their suffering, I'm willing to die. However, Lord You—no matter how His Majesty treats me, I want to beg you to save the life of one man."

A thought stirred in You Miao, and he remembered what Tu Risheng had said before: *An old acquaintance of yours wants to meet you...*

Who was that, exactly? You Miao raised his guard.

"Come with me, Lord You." Tu Risheng beckoned. He didn't wait for You Miao's response before walking further into the reed bushes, startling a flock of birds into flight.

[Chapter 49]

As twilight deepened, the rays of the setting sun were like streaks of blood that reflected the first sliver of the moon over the frozen mountains. You Miao wasn't suspicious that Tu Risheng was attempting to blackmail him, or trying anything else uncouth; even if he captured You Miao, it would be pointless.

"Before the southern countryside's uprising, I'd already made up my mind—as long as the government is willing to open up their stores for disaster aid, I and all of my men would turn ourselves in," Tu Risheng said as he walked.

"You already knew that the uprising wouldn't succeed?" You Miao asked.

Tu Risheng nodded. "Yes, and several of my closest brothers pretty much knew what the end result would be after this battle. The fact that Lord You is willing to disregard our accountability in the matter is already a great mercy of Heaven. But for this particular brother, I still feel that it's your say in the matter. His Majesty can cut off my head, but sir, you must protect him. Allow him to fight for the country and recover our Tianqi's glory."

He led You Miao to a small hovel in the wild plains, and continued, "I already promised him that no matter victory or defeat, I will find a way to settle him somewhere. He was also the one who told me that since you were the one to come to promulgate the new law, there is hope for the survival of the Jiangnan people."

You Miao still didn't know why Tu Risheng was keeping him in suspense. He'd been racking his brains the entire way, yet he still couldn't think of any old acquaintance who would join the ranks of a peasant army. However, the moment he pushed open the door of the hovel, he stared at the man inside in shock. Then, tears abruptly welled his eyes.

The man was sitting on his knees. A black strip covered his eyes. His face was dirty, and his hair was tangled with mud and filth. He was so gaunt that it frightened You Miao.

"Tu-da-ge? Are you back?" the man asked.

You Miao dropped to his knees in front of Tang Hui, reaching out to touch the black cloth covering his eyes. Tang Hui froze, startled. Then, shaking, he grabbed You Miao's hand.

“Tang-da-ge...” You Miao’s voice trembled. “Tang-da-ge? It’s you?!”

At that moment, no matter what Tang Hui said or however he begged, You Miao ignored it all and forcibly hauled him upright and dragged him directly toward the army camp. He called for Li Zhifeng as he stalked over, and despite Tang Hui’s attempts to struggle free and escape, he was seized by Li Zhifeng in the end and brought back to camp.

In the deep night, beneath the candlelight, You Miao continuously swallowed his tears as he unraveled the cloth binding Tang Hui’s eyes to reveal two startlingly empty sockets.

“Has His Majesty asked after me?” Tang Hui asked in a trembling voice.

Sounding choked up, You Miao replied, “Yes. We all thought you had died.”

Tang Hui’s voice sank into despair. “I’ve no face to keep living, and no face to die. I’ve let His Highness down, I’ve let General Nie down, I’ve let you all down...”

“Victory and defeat are common to war,” Li Zhifeng said quietly. “If everyone thought the way you do, how would we go on?”

You Miao sighed inwardly. If Nie Dan was here, he’d give Tang Hui a hell of a beating, then drag his sorry ass back to court. Had this been a different time and place, Tang Hui’s defeat and escape back to Tianqi, abandoning everything, would have led to only one fate—decapitation. However, at this point, none of that mattered anymore.

“Everything’s well now that you’ve returned,” You Miao said. “Come back with us.”

“You Ziqian, if you don’t hold this gege of yours in contempt, then listen to his one plea—kill me. Right here. That way, I’ll still be the General Tang who sacrificed it all for the country.”

Li Zhifeng flew into a rage. “How long do you plan on hiding?! Will you live on in the shadows, or die humiliated? Will the Tartars get the hell back north if you die?!”

Tang Hui blanched, completely frozen.

You Miao sighed. “Tu Risheng is willing to exchange his own life for yours. Tang-da-ge, at the very least, for his sake—think. Are you determined to keep your perfect reputation, or will you place the country first?”

Tang Hui fell silent.

That night, Li Zhifeng blended a cream that would help Tang Hui with his physical injuries, and then he and You Miao helped Tang Hui remove his clothes to wipe him down. You Miao had never seen anyone in such a sorry condition in his life—Tang Hui was practically skin and bones, each of his ribs clear and defined, and his body was covered in wounds. Back when You Miao had saved Li Zhifeng from death's door, Li Zhifeng was still in good physical condition; unlike Tang Hui, who looked as if he could die at any minute.

You Miao asked him a few questions, and Tang Hui told him without hiding anything. At that battle on the Yellow River shore, the Tartars had ambushed them in the middle of the night. The icy surface of the river cracked, bringing the Imperial Army down with it. After falling into the water, Tang Hui was pulled out by the Tartar cavalry; none of them had known he was the commander, and thought he was some subchief within the army.

The Imperial Army was responsible for the patrol and defense of the capital city; their main duty was to manage palace security. Thus, Tang Hui was horribly tortured for information, and his eyes were gouged out in the process—but he would've rather died than give in. However, the Tartars managed to get one of the captured captains to identify Tang Hui—one of Tang Hui's right-hand men, and someone who had received Tang Hui's kindness and favor for many years. Although that captain ate royal grain, not all of his loyalties lay with the royal family—the moment he saw Tang Hui with his eyes gouged out, he revealed the existence of the palace's secret passageway that led out of the city in order to save Tang Hui's life.

And thus, many days later, the imperial city was conquered.

Afterward, the Tartar army was too preoccupied with pillaging and plundering to mind the blinded Tang Hui. Desperate to save his master, the captain killed the guard in the middle of the night and rescued Tang Hui from the great Tartar camp. The two fled all the way south to Jiangnan. Tang Hui unwittingly learned that the man had betrayed the imperial court in order to save him, and he questioned interrogated him on the matter in fury. The captain was aware of how deeply he had sinned; how his actions had brought disaster upon the people. Dispirited, he ended his own life, and used his death to repay Tang Hui.

At first, Tang Hui had wanted to pay a life for a life —to simply slit his own throat and end it all out in the wilderness. But that captain had

followed him for years; he had been by his side ever since his transfer from Jiangnan, from his days in the Yang Prefectural Army to his tenure in the Imperial Army. Even though the man was dead, he still had an elderly mother and a wife and children at home in Jiang Prefecture to be cared for.

Thus, with the support of a wooden cane, Tang Hui joined the refugees. He fled all the way to Jiang Prefecture, where he found the captain's remaining family. At this time, Jiang Prefecture was already battling a severe famine; the people had resorted to eating their own children. Tang Hui had felt helpless; for all of his martial prowess, he could no longer see. Later, he was inadvertently discovered by Tu Risheng, who entreated him to join the rebel army.

You Miao couldn't speak for the longest the time.

Li Zhifeng, however, made a blunt, honest remark: "There's no need to blame yourself. Even if your subordinate didn't give away the secret passage, the imperial capital would've fallen anyway. It was only a matter of time."

Tang Hui smiled bitterly. Sounding like a dead man, he said, "Too many have died because of me. Even if you don't kill me, His Majesty would."

This certainly was tricky business. The number of Imperial Army soldiers lost at the Yellow River alone was enough for Tang Hui to lose his head many times over—never mind the desertion, manipulating his subordinate, and strategizing on behalf of the rebel army in order to fight his own soldiers... All of that was enough to execute his entire clan many times over.

You Miao said helplessly, "So why in the world did you bother helping Tu Risheng?"

"Tu Risheng promised to give me food, and to settle Wang-xiongdi's family."

"Wang-xiongdi" had to be the subordinate who died in front of Tang Hui. It hadn't been easy for Tang Hui to survive all this—to be blinded, to run all the way from the Yellow River to Yang Prefecture, and to have the man he'd spent over a decade with die before him. The mere thought Tang Hui walking aimlessly in the wild with the support of a stick made You Miao's heart clench.

"Well, no matter what, it's good to have you back," You Miao said. "The court is in need of skilled commanders, so everything will go smoothly with you around."

“Do you think I’m still capable of commanding an army like this?” Tang Hui asked back.

You Miao ignored his question and only said, quietly, “Tang-da-ge, go take a rest for now. General Nie once said that courage isn’t dying to seek an end to it all; there is no meaning to suicide. Instead, you have to think about how to continue living; to live well, even. Living is much more difficult than dying.”

After having made his point, You Miao exited the tent.

Late at night, You Miao and Li Zhifeng lay together inside the commander’s tent as the wind howled outside. The grain had been distributed, so they would make their way back to Maocheng the next morning. And when they got back, there was a huge pile of things to take care of. You Miao didn’t know why, but he was feeling especially nervous, and he spaced out as he hugged Li Zhifeng tight.

“If your eyes were gouged out and your life was on the line, I would give them anything they told me to,” Li Zhifeng suddenly said.

You Miao knew that Li Zhifeng was also affected by Tang Hui’s story. He murmured, “Since time immemorial, it’s been difficult to balance loyalty and justice. That’s certainly the case here.”

“If I dragged down Tianqi for your sake and killed hundreds of thousands, would you be in as much agony as Tang Hui?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“It’s not the same.” You Miao thought for a moment, then ended up laughing. “It’s not like we’re the same as them.”

Li Zhifeng was a little confused, and You Miao explained, “To sacrifice oneself for the sake of justice, to die for a just cause... what the men of books strive for really is nothing but integrity. Whether it’s practicing the way of the Dao, believing in Buddhas, or reading millions of books, it all boils down to cultivating the mind and the body—so that when it’s time to fight, we can fight to the bitter end. And that when we have genuinely reached the point where there is no other way out, we won’t be afraid to die.”

“And if things do reach that point?” Li Zhifeng pushed.

You Miao thought for a moment. What if he had no choice but to betray Tianqi for the sake of Li Zhifeng?

“I can’t say,” he replied solemnly. “I’d have no choice but to wander the world with you. But in my heart, I will definitely be miserable. After all, serving the country, serving the people, loving and caring for the common

folk—those are all things I've been taught to do since I was young... None of that can truly be forgotten."

Li Zhifeng nodded, and the subject was dropped.

The next day, the party set off to return to Maocheng. Their route crossed through Yang Prefectural City and other such locales, and as they made their way through town, Tu Risheng remained locked and shackled inside the jail car meant for prisoners of war, escorted by a squad of soldiers.

Xie Quan was having a heated argument with You Miao over this arrangement. "No matter what you say, he's an upstanding man. Lord You didn't have to humiliate him like this," he argued.

You Miao only replied mildly, "But he's fine with it, though?"

Xie Quan heaved a sigh. "He might be fine with it, but this..."

You Miao let out an exasperated sigh and waved, patting Xie Quan on the shoulder. "I know what I'm doing, so just listen to me. Doing this isn't to humiliate Tu Risheng, but to save his life."

Xie Quan still didn't get it. As the army entered the city, however, the people filled the streets to watch them pass. The crowd pointed and talked amongst themselves, yet no one cursed or yelled at Tu Risheng, nor did anyone throw things at the cart—no rocks, eggs, rotten squash or ragged vegetables, or anything of the sort.

Someone shouted, "That's the head of the rebel army!"

Despite the shackles, Tu Risheng grinned proudly at both sides of the street, nodding at the crowd politely. "That's right," he admitted.

They paraded like this all the way to Maocheng. The families of the officials poured into the streets; some to welcome back the triumphant Li Zhifeng, and some just to take a look at Tu Risheng after hearing the news. The army had only just passed through Wumen Gate when prisoner control changed hands, and Tu Risheng was taken away. You Miao told Li Zhifeng to go back to camp and regroup, while he and Xie Quan entered the imperial study to report to Zhao Chao in private.

After listening to Xie Quan's report, Zhao Chao showed neither surprise nor approval, and only nodded in acknowledgment.

"Why don't you leave first?" You Miao said to Xie Quan, who nodded, bowed, and left the room.

Instinctively, Zhao Chao knew You Miao had something to say to him; You Miao hadn't said a word during Xie Quan's report, after all. But when

he sent Ping Xi a look, You Miao stopped Ping Xi from leaving and turned to them both.

"Tang Hui is back," You Miao announced.

The news caused such a great shock to Zhao Chao and Ping Xi that You Miao was actually a little scared. He had carefully deliberated how to tell Zhao Chao about this matter; in fact, You Miao had been thinking about it for the entire journey back. He had also discussed the problem over and over with Li Zhifeng, and the two had come to the same conclusion: whether it was for the sake of Tianqi, or Zhao Chao, or Tang Hui himself, this was not something that could be concealed.

Not doubt finding somewhere for Tang Hui to live and to care for him for the rest of his life would be a piece of cake. After all, You Miao came from great wealth and background; never mind feeding an extra mouth, even with several hundreds more Tang Huis there would be enough to eat, so never mind fretting over an extra mouth to feed. But for what reason would Tang Hui live?

Everyone has ambitions and dreams. From all that Tang Hui had done recently, it was obvious he still clung to the dream of fighting for the country. Otherwise, he wouldn't have come to see You Miao at all, nor would he have returned.

After hearing the news, Zhao Chao and Ping Xi were silent for a long time. You Miao also stayed solemnly quiet and paced back and forth, meaning: *"You guys figure it out; I've no power to make decisions."*

This lasted until there was a knock on the study's door, and a guard announced, "Academician Li requests an audience." Only after Li Yan had entered did Zhao Chao and Ping Xi come back around.

Li Yan looked perplexed by the mood in the room, but he first genuflected to greet Zhao Chao before turning to You Miao. "Congratulations on Lord You's triumphant return."

You Miao nodded. When Li Yan saw that none of the three were speaking, he stood down off to the side, standing tall and proper.

At last, Zhao Chao said after a sigh, "Draft a statement. At the assembly tomorrow morning, Li Zhifeng will be rewarded. You Miao, we'll forego your reward..." You Miao inclined his head in acknowledgment, and Zhao Chao added, "There was something else that We originally wanted to ask, but since Tang Hui is still alive, this matter will have to be pushed back..."

Li Yan gave a start upon hearing this, and turned his gaze to You Miao in disbelief.

"This is a matter of grave importance. Where is General Tang right now?" Ping Xi asked.

"This subject ordered that he be sent to the Administration Chamber," You Miao answered. "If Your Majesty wishes to summon him, I will have him brought over immediately."

Zhao Chao waved him off, however. "No rush; We haven't made up Our mind yet."

Solemn silence returned to the study. A moment later, Zhao Chao said, "The matter of Tang Hui being alive—how he returned, when he returned, and why he didn't die—must not be publicized outside court. Anyone who leaks this information prematurely will lose their head."

The other three quickly bowed in acknowledgment. You Miao immediately knew this meant Tang Hui's future wouldn't be too bleak; Zhao Chao wanting to keep him a secret obviously meant that he planned on using Tang Hui again.

"This subject has another matter to discuss," You Miao started.

He knew he had to strike the iron while it was still hot; that he had to bring up Tu Risheng and lump the pleas for mercy together. But as soon as You Miao spoke, Zhao Chao guessed what was on his mind.

"About Tu Risheng?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." You Miao audaciously declared, "Tu Risheng does not have the intent to rebel."

"If the uprising didn't count as 'intent to rebel,' then what *does*?!" Zhao Chao snapped, furious all of a sudden. "Does he have to charge into the palace and capture Us alive before it counts?!"

The abrupt rebuke made You Miao startle in surprise. Li Yan and Ping Xi quickly eyed him, signaling him to stop talking. However, You Miao frowned deeply and forced himself to boldly continue.

"Your Majesty, Tu Risheng only fought to secure a bite to eat for the people of Jiang and Yi Prefectures—"

"Drop it," Zhao Chao cut him off coldly. "I've my own thoughts on the matter."

You Miao regarded him, then continued in spite of himself, "Your Majesty, now is the time to use the talented folk we have. Tu Risheng is aware he must die—"

“I said *enough*, You Ziqian!” Zhao Chao snapped. You Miao had to hush up, and Zhao Chao added, “All of you are dismissed.”

Ping Xi and Li Yan took their leave, but You Miao continued to stand there, waiting to say a few more words.

However, Zhao Chao said, “You, too.”

The dismissal surprised You Miao; he wondered if he might have touched a nerve. But now wasn’t the time to say more, so he bowed and exited the study. Inside the imperial garden, Ping Xi and Li Yan were engaged in conversation as they waited for him to emerge. When they saw You Miao hurry out, his face full of worries, Li Yan quickly approached.

“You promised Tu Risheng that you’d spare his life?”

“No,” You Miao replied.

“Then don’t worry about it,” Ping Xi consoled.

Li Yan whispered next to You Miao’s ear, “Don’t bring up Tu Risheng in front of His Majesty anymore. Don’t you know his sore spots after following him all these years?”

You Miao had to nod in agreement. Indeed, he was well aware that Zhao Chao was someone who could be agreeable to anything—except when it came to matters of treason and rebellion; even just the subject of the throne itself. As soon as any of those topics were mentioned, he could turn hostile. Before the expedition, Zhao Chao had already shown his displeasure toward Tu Risheng—his gritted teeth clearly indicating that he couldn’t wait to execute the man on the spot once apprehended.

However, Tu Risheng was an exceedingly important symbolic figure for Tianqi. After all, this was the first revolt Zhao Chao had faced since coming to power—his approach when handling this man would directly affect the relationship between the government and the people, and would determine whether more peasant uprisings would begin to stir.

Whatever; since the road was blocked for the moment, You Miao would shelve the matter for later. Tu Risheng’s case would be dragged out for at least three or five more days, anyway. Having thought to this point, You Miao turned to Li Yan.

“His Majesty seemed to have something more to say. Do you know what it was about?”

“Now that the unrest is settled, when spring arrives it will be time to maneuver troops north. Someone needs to be sent to the frontlines to supervise the army,” Li Yan answered.

Ping Xi said, “Originally, the plan was to have Li Zhifeng lead the vanguard, but then Nie Dan will have to withdraw from the frontlines to defend Yang Prefecture. Now that Tang Hui is back, maybe the strategy will need to change. Everything will have to be left as it is for now.”

You Miao nodded, and the three broke off at the back entrance of the palace. You Miao returned to the Administration Chamber for the evening.

* * *

That night, You Miao treated Tang Hui’s wounds; he hadn’t dared to publicize Tang Hui’s return, so all he could do in preparation for treatment was to ask a well-known doctor from Maocheng to prescribe some medication for external application and internal ingestion. The sores on Tang Hui’s back had festered so dreadfully that maggots had rooted within, so the dead flesh needed to be cut away before any medicinal creams could be applied. Even as You Miao carefully picked open the sores, Tang Hui held in his pain and didn’t make a sound.

During the process, a boy servant came to announce that someone from the palace had arrived. A guard’s knock on the door followed, but when You Miao went to open the door, he was startled to come face to face with Zhao Chao under the moonlight.

With deeply knitted brows, Zhao Chao said in a low voice, “Wait outside.”

You Miao had to nod, and Zhao Chao entered the room, closing the door behind him. A soft “Your Majesty” could be heard from inside the room, but then nothing distinct after that.

For a long time, Zhao Chao and Tang Hui talked on and off in hushed whispers, their voices growing softer and softer. You Miao could vaguely guess the content of their conversation from the broken words—nothing more than Zhao Chao consoling Tang Hui, telling him it was good to have him back, though his tone still carried reproach.

Zhao Chao told Tang Hui to atone for his crimes with accomplishments. He would arrange an announcement to the world: officials and common folk alike would hear that Tang Hui had refused to bend even in the face of death, which had provoked the Tartars to gouge out his eyes. Now that he had returned to court, he would fight for the country with his life.

Afterward, there was a series of soft knocks against the floor tiles—it was the sound of Tang Hui's kowtowing head hitting the ground. As You Miao continued to listen quietly, a strange feeling suddenly engulfed him.

What was Zhao Chao thinking when he said all that to Tang Hui? He now possessed a voice filled with authority and dignity; no longer that Third Prince of the past.

In those bygone years, Tang Hui had followed Zhao Chao everywhere; he was essentially the officer Zhao Chao relied upon most heavily. Nie Dan wasn't at court, so when Zhao Chao issued commands, Tang Hui was the one who carried them out. It would not be outrageous in the least to say that he was loyal and devoted to Zhao Chao. At first, You Miao had thought Zhao Chao's reaction would have been to hug Tang Hui and bawl, or to knock the man down with a kick and furiously admonish him for his past crimes. Never would he have guessed that Zhao Chao would use such an authoritative tone. He knew Tang Hui's return had given Zhao Chao sorrow, delight, and anger, but Zhao Chao had surprisingly managed to suppress all of those emotions.

Zhao Chao emerged not long after, and without a word, You Miao pushed the door to go back inside.

"What are you doing?" Zhao Chao questioned.

"Going to apply cream for Tang-da-ge," You Miao replied in a low voice.

"Hang on, We have words for you," Zhao Chao said.

And so You Miao closed the door once more and entered the yard with Zhao Chao. The bright moon was hanging in mid-sky, its silvery light shining for thousands of miles. Zhao Chao was dressed in casual clothes tonight, yet the starkly black dragon robe made him look even more unfeeling under the clear moonlight.

Zhao Chao deliberated for a long time before he started to speak. "You're angry with Us."

You Miao exhaled a breath. A statement like that from Zhao Chao was essentially an offered apology in subservience. And the truth was, You Miao really had been giving Zhao Chao the cold shoulder. He would have to find a way to end this confrontation with grace.

"This subject doesn't dare," he replied softly.

Zhao Chao watched You Miao, whose head was slightly bowed beneath the moonlight.

“How many years have you and Li Zhifeng been together?” Zhao Chao suddenly asked.

The abrupt question threw You Miao off. How many years *had* he been with Li Zhifeng? Even You Miao himself never seriously counted. They had been together since he was fifteen, and had met on a similar night to this one in the depths of autumn. It had just snowed that day. He had gone down Changlong Lane on his way to Chancellor Li’s residence...and then he saw Li Zhifeng being beaten in the backyard.

He left for Jiangnan that same year. His servants were all dismissed, and only Li Zhifeng stayed by his side... Then they stayed in Yang Prefecture for three years, which took them up to the state exams. At nineteen, he was appointed as the Tanhua. Adding it all up, five years had passed since he first met Li Zhifeng.

“Five years,” You Miao answered. “I met him around this time five years ago.”

Zhao Chao stared at the pond in the Administration Chamber’s yard, transfixed at the sight of its water reflecting the bright full moon. Sounding like he was lost in thought, he said, “Li Zhifeng once asked something of me.”

When You Miao didn’t respond, Zhao Chao continued, “He and Nie-da-ge will recover the Central Plains for me, and in return, he asked that I send armies to help him unify the Quanrong north of the border—to aid him in becoming the King of Quanrong. And then, to allow you to go with him.”

You Miao gave a “mn” in reply, and Zhao Chao muttered to himself, “All of you have serving the country and the people on your minds, but once the country is whole again, every single one of you will leave.”

“Is Nie-da-ge leaving too?” You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao turned around. “Next time you see his fan, you’ll understand.”

You Miao quirked his lips.

“By then I will be the only one left, sitting at court all by myself,” Zhao Chao said. “There are times that I ask myself, what’s the point of me doing so much?”

You Miao didn’t dare respond to that, knowing Zhao Chao was only venting. After all, who could desert their duty? Everyone carried their own responsibilities on their shoulders; Zhao Chao knew this better than anyone. The reason he was willing to follow Zhao Chao and not the former emperor

was precisely because Zhao Chao was like an unyielding weed; standing tall no matter how strong the storm. The unyielding perseverance of a military man, the determination to never give up—that was a kind of spirit that Zhao Zhuo didn't possess.

"Come spring next year, you will return to your post as Army Supervisor," Zhao Chao said, turning back around. "Nie-da-ge will defend Jiangnan, and Li Zhifeng's troops will advance to the south of the Central Plains. You will be responsible for starting the war with the Tartars, and simultaneously do your utmost to negotiate with the Dis and the Huns."

You Miao squinted. "Your Majesty, I wish to nominate someone else."

Zhao Chao was somewhat surprised, and his brow wrinkled.

"The new law hasn't settled in yet," You Miao said. "When spring comes, there will surely be much turmoil; one thing after the other. Not to mention there's the Jiangnan gentry to manage. The war with the Barbarians will last for at least a year; if I go off to supervise the army, only Tang Bo will be left to take charge at the Administration Chamber."

Zhao Chao nodded slowly, muttering, "Yes, this is something We didn't consider... You can't leave. Even though the reform was already announced, there is yet much work to do for the coming year. Who do you think can go instead, then?"

"Li Yan can," You Miao said. When Zhao Chao appeared hesitant, he added, "His father died at the hands of the Tartars; he has more right than the Jiangnan gentry to attend negotiations. If you plan on appointing Li Zhifeng as marshal, he can keep him in check."

Halfway through their conversation, they suddenly heard footsteps. It was Sun Yu passing by, and when he noticed Zhao Chao, puzzlement flashed across his face. You Miao quickly bowed in greeting, to which Sun Yu nodded in acknowledgment.

"Mn. We will return and consider it," Zhao Chao said. Following this, he greeted Sun Yu and left.

After Zhao Chao had gone, You Miao gave Sun Yu a light bow. With a suppressed voice, Sun Yu asked, "Who's inside?"

You Miao whispered the details of the matter of Tang Hui in his ear, and Sun Yu's reaction was just as You Miao had expected—neither approval nor objection. All he said was, "Do as you see fit."

"What do you think about this, sir?" You Miao prompted.

Yet Sun Yu only nodded, making no comment other than a few coughs as he turned to leave. You Miao thought he was being reproached for overstepping his authority, and hurried to assist Sun Yu through the corridors.

You Miao explained, “Things were urgent at the time; your student wasn’t able to send word back to Maocheng...”

“No... *Cough, cough*!”

Sun Yu quickly waved You Miao off and patted his shoulder, nodding his head. You Miao sighed a breath in relief.

With effort, Sun Yu, “You’ve...done very well... If you can make your own decisions, then you don’t need...to ask me...*cough*!”

You Miao became anxious again. “Sir, have you fallen ill?”

“A mere cold.” Sun Yu coughed a few more times before he blew out a breath and gestured that he was fine. “I’ve been gluttonous recently; I consumed cold foods, hence the cough.[4]”

You Miao nodded. “I will accompany you back to your chamber, sir.”

Sun Yu was getting on in years, his body gradually failing. Decades ago when he supervised the army, he caught an illness that was prone to relapse. After You Miao confirmed with Sun Yu’s old servant that his teacher hadn’t been coughing up blood, he finally relaxed a little and instructed Mu Feng to fetch some supplemental warming medicine from his store the next day.

After getting back to his own room, You Miao continued tending to Tang Hui’s wounds.

“Ziqian,” Tang Hui said in a low voice. “Thanks to you, this gege of yours could return to the capital. And on account of your endorsement, His Majesty even gave me the chance to atone for my crimes...”

Sadness welled up in You Miao’s heart, and he consoled him, “Tang-da-ge, there’s no need to be so polite.”

Tang Hui nodded. “I know you don’t need to hear the thanks. But I assure you that I will fight on the battlefield until the very end; for as long as I still live. I will not bring shame to you or His Majesty.”

You Miao sighed. Zhao Chao had decided to make use of Tang Hui once more; this act was in fact a greater mercy than simply allowing him to stay alive. At last, all the dust had finally settled.

[Chapter 50]

Many days later, the first snow of the season arrived. Such beautiful snow was rare in the region of Yang Prefecture, but it fell rather thickly that winter. The rivers froze in the span of one night, and ornate silver lined the tree branches and black tiled roofs. In the streets, children laughed and ran about as they played with the snow.

Inside the Administration Chamber, the group of supervisory secretaries were huffing hot breaths of steam.

"'A fall of seasonable snow gives promise to a fruitful year,'" Tang Bo said absentmindedly as he flipped through the memorials. "Pray the coming year will bear good harvests."

After a moment of thought, You Miao said, "Based on past weather at Riverwave Estate, there shouldn't be any more great droughts or floods this year."

Sun Yu had caught a cold, and the illness kept him bedridden for days. Today he had finally been able to make a trip to the morning assembly, but he hadn't yet returned. At court, Zhao Chao threw Tu Risheng into the imperial prison without consulting with any officials on the matter. In this way, he neither condemned him to execution nor brought him to trial—a considerable compromise. After lunch that day, the Administration Chamber found they had finished processing all pending memorials to the throne; a rare occasion. And so, the supervisory secretaries slipped outside to watch the snow.

Just then, the boy servant Mu Feng entered the grounds with an invitation in hand.

As he took the card, You Miao asked him, "Where's Li Zhifeng?"

"The general has returned to the estate," Mu Feng answered. "He was concerned that the waterwheel might crack because of the freezing weather. He gathered some available workers, and they are currently giving the wheel a new layer of paint."

"Is the Yangtze frozen?" You Miao asked.

"To answer shaoye, the Yangtze remains unfrozen as always," Mu Feng replied.

Relaxing at the response, You Miao opened the invite and skimmed it. It was an invitation to Xie Hui's plum blossom viewing event. The plum

blossoms would bloom in the twelfth month, and the Xie family owned an estate in Yang Prefecture —about three miles away from Yang Prefectural City, it was renowned as Jiangnan's foremost garden. As You Miao had guessed, many handsome young talents had been invited—including himself.

"Did Li Zhifeng get an invite?" You Miao asked.

"The general also received one," Mu Feng replied.

Since they were both invited, they might as well go. When You Miao returned to the main hall, he tossed the invite onto his desk. Tang Bo spotted it there when he passed by, and was not surprised by it in the least.

With a smile, he asked, "Has You-xiong also received an invite to the Plum Garden?"

You Miao nodded, grinning. "Looks like Minister Xie's party has invite quite a number of people, huh. Is Tang-xiong going too?"

"No, no," Tang Bo quickly said. "Only unmarried men would go to the Plum Garden on Laba. We married men will eat a bowl of festive congee at home.[5]"

You Miao was instantly mortified—so *that* was the real intention of this event. Was Xie Hui so idle that he had the time to matchmake the juniors of the Jiangnan gentry? But when You Miao thought about it further, the former imperial capital was also like this back then—the girls and boys pairing off on Shangyuan night also harbored the same intent. Unfortunately, he and Li Zhifeng had promised themselves to each other in private—attending a matchmaking event would be awkward, but declining to attend wouldn't be proper. They had no choice but to go and deal with it.

On the day of Laba, the snow had yet to melt before a fresh layer blanketed the old. When You Miao got out of bed past noon, Li Zhifeng was already waiting outside the Administration Chamber, and the two rode on Li Zhifeng's horse to the Xie estate.

An entire garden's worth of plum blossoms bloomed brilliantly; the fragrance filling one's nostrils. The moment You Miao entered, he was immediately surrounded by a group of youngsters fighting to greet him—the children of the civil officials. You Miao had to nod placatingly to return the niceties being hurled his way, smiling fakely all the while. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng was still the same as always; wearing that cool and indifferent expression.

The garden had many fine terraces and gazebos, and every part of the landscaping was exceedingly tasteful—every blade of grass, every branch on the trees, all the rockeries and bamboo. Nevertheless, after making a round of the area, You Miao rated it with a simple, “Meh.”

Chuckling, he turned to Li Zhifeng and remarked, “It’s not as spacious as our garden, and the decor is only so-so.”

“There are plenty of gardens in Jiangnan that can’t compare to this one,” Li Zhifeng said.

Exasperated, Xie Quan spoke up from behind the two, “Lord You, you live at *Shen Garden*. That’s the only reason why you think this garden is ordinary...”

Feeling extremely embarrassed, You Miao quickly laughed it off with Xie Quan, though the man didn’t think anything of it.

“When it comes to Jiangnan winter scenery, Plum Garden’s is the finest,” Xie Quan said.

“Mn,” You Miao agreed. “It’s certainly exquisitely built...”

As You Miao and Li Zhifeng casually strolled around, they quickly realized two things: everyone here was single, and they knew almost none of them. Ping Xi, Li Yan, Qin Shaonan, Lin Luoyang, and other old-time friends had all gotten married by now. Anyone who was paying attention could see the true nature of the relationship that You Miao and Li Zhifeng shared. The refined gentlemen of Jiangnan gracefully accepted their relationship, but they considered it to be idle fooling around. The unspoken understanding was that, regardless of their feelings on the matter, You Miao and Li Zhifeng would eventually have to marry women and build separate families.

However, no one could give You Miao a hard time since Zhao Chao wasn’t doing anything about the pair. Xie Hui had the mind to marry his niece to You Miao, so he’d spent the entire day running around the garden in search of him. When he found him at last, You Miao and Li Zhifeng were in the northeastern corner of the garden...digging for something in the ground.

The corners of Xie Hui’s lips twitched as You Miao and Li Zhifeng continued to talk amongst themselves.

Li Zhifeng said, “Ask him for it first. You can’t just dig up the host’s things like this...”

“Don’t worry about it, just dig it out,” You Miao urged. “Once we leave, we’ll never find it again; we don’t know our way around this garden. He’ll definitely say yes.”

Xie Hui cleared his throat a few times, giving You Miao a huge scare. He quickly turned around with a big smile and greeted, “Lord Xie.”

Xie Hui nodded. You Miao and Li Zhifeng were both dressed sumptuously, yet their hands were covered in mud.

“Lord Xie, I want to ask you for this camellia,” You Miao said, pointing at the muddy earth.

Although the camellia in question might’ve been a flower, it currently looked more like a weed that was swarmed and squished in a crowd of peonies. Thanks to the winter frost, it was wilted and half-dead. The estate gardener evidently hadn’t known what it was, so it’d been thrown into this corner for it to perish on its own with the passage of time. Had You Miao not stated the name of the bloom in his request, Xie Hui wouldn’t have even known what kind of flower it was.

With exasperation, Xie Hui said, “Since you fancy it, Lord You it would’ve been perfectly fine to have a servant dig it out and deliver it to your estate. Why use your own hands?”

“Oh, it’s fine.” You Miao smiled and waved dismissively with a hand that was covered in mud.

A few girls behind Xie Hui were giggling themselves into a frenzy, and Xie Hui turned slightly and called out, “Huang-er, come greet Lord You and General Li.”

The leading girl curtsied, and You Miao hastily returned the greeting.

Xie Hui then acquainted them, “This is my older brother’s only daughter, Xie Yuhuang. This is the Tang family’s third daughter, Liu Ming, and this is my uncle’s niece, Min-er...”

As Xie Hui introduced the girls, they gave small smiles toward You Miao and Li Zhifeng and playfully pushed each other. Unused to meeting women, Li Zhifeng flushed a bright red that was seldomly seen on him and nodded to them stiffly. The girls giggled harder, but when Xie Hui turned around, they pursed their lips.

Turning back around, Xie Hui said, “Lord You, forgive me, but there are guests in the front courtyard that I must attend to...”

Understanding, You Miao said, “Please take care of what you need, Lord Xie.”

“Well, in that case, will my lords please take the girls to Xieyi Pavilion?” Xie Hui said, sounding cheered.

You Miao nodded and took over the group of maidens. They were all very curious about You Miao and Li Zhifeng, and their favor of Li Zhifeng was noticeably greater than of You Miao—for You Miao only knew how to clown around and crack very slovenly jokes at them.

“Why has this camellia caught the general’s eye?” asked Xie Yuhuang, the oldest of the girls.

“This is a foreign breed,” Li Zhifeng replied. “A past ruler of the country of Dongying gifted it to the old capital, but the climate there wasn’t suitable for its growth. Of the ten shrubs given, only this one remained.”

The girls nodded, and one of them said in amazement, “They all say General Li is adept in combat, yet who would’ve guessed he is learned in tea and its flora as well?”

Blushing, Li Zhifeng pointed at You Miao and said, “He taught me.”

The giggling started again. You Miao cleared his throat, signaling Li Zhifeng to at least use a bureaucratic tone instead of being so straightforward. Li Zhifeng misunderstood, however, and asked, “Was I wrong? You were just talking about it.”

You Miao burst out laughing, unable to hold himself back, either.

The group arrived at Xieyi Pavilion after turning through the corridor, and found that other young masters were sitting inside. As soon as they spotted You Miao and Li Zhifeng, they all stood and bowed in greeting. After all, most of the handsome young talents gathered at Plum Garden were in the sixth rank; lower in status compared to the two of them. It was rare indeed for a high official of the third or fourth rank to be still unmarried after the age of twenty, as You Miao and Li Zhifeng were. When Xie Hui sat at the head seat, everyone had to respectfully address him as “Lord Xie,” and You Miao and Li Zhifeng were the highest-ranked guests present after Xie Hui himself.

“Be at ease, everyone. No need to mind us,” You Miao said with a smile.

Li Zhifeng whispered next to You Miao’s ear, “We’re matching verses? [6] I don’t know how.”

“I’ll write a matching verse for you in a bit,” You Miao said.

In the past, You Miao might have tried to steal the spotlight—and in doing so would have provoked jealousy, rolled eyes, and arguments.

However, he had little interest in battling against a bunch of young'uns like these. If he pulled all the focus and won, it would only look like he was bullying a bunch of teenagers; it wouldn't be a fair victory. And so, he only planned on keeping them company with smiles and playing along.

The minute You Miao and Li Zhifeng joined the party, all the girls in the pavilion changed their conversations to involve them. The ones who had met them previously asked them about this and that out of curiosity, and those who were new curiously inquired about Li Zhifeng's battle record from their fellow maiden friends. For a time, all discussion revolved around the pair.

One of the young men laughed. "Lord You, why don't you start today's coupleting game?"

"Sure," You Miao said with a chuckle, knowing full well that the group wanted to kiss his ass. However, he couldn't help but find all this rather boring and tasteless. "As the first verse, I'll start with, 'Fragrant plum blossoms of the snow garden crystalize magnificence.' The matching verses must not use any of the words in this line. Please go ahead."

The group broke into laughter when You Miao presented his verse; never having expected that he'd offer such a difficult starter. But since that's what had been presented, they had to force themselves to keep the game going. It wasn't long, though, before Xie Hui hurried into the pavilion.

"Lord You, General Li, you have been summoned to court. Urgent matters. Please, this way."

Thank god, perfect timing, You Miao thought. He and Li Zhifeng left, abandoning the pavilion full of boys and girls.

* * *

It took six hours before You Miao learned just how serious the matter for which he'd been summoned really was, and how shocking—the Five Barbarian Tribes had sent an emissary to Yang Prefecture.

It was complete chaos inside the main palace hall. No one had imagined the Huns would send an emissary at a time like this; Li Yan, who was responsible for receiving such representatives, was keeping the man company in the side hall. Zhao Chao's summons to the palace was

unexpected, and You Miao was one of the first officials to arrive. Sun Yu and the others hadn't yet made it.

Ping Xi handed over Nie Dan's military report. You Miao passed it to Li Zhifeng after he finished reading it, who then passed it to Xie Hui once he was done.

The hall was packed with officials.

"The Huns want to ally with us to fight the Tartars," Zhao Chao began. "General Nie's intentions are written in the report. This matter needs to be dealt with as soon as possible. What are your thoughts?"

No one inside the hall answered, each pondering the significance of what this alliance would mean to Tianqi.

"This subject is concerned about potential deceit," Tang Xi said respectfully. "Whatever matter prompted them to take this action is most definitely not simple."

"How complicated can it be?" You Miao said from the side, wearing a grin.

He glanced outside; seeing that Sun Yu had come, the officials all nodded in greeting and Zhao Chao instructed a chair be brought in for Sun Yu to sit.

"The Five Barbarian Tribes are full of tricks; they aren't to be trusted!" Tang Xin exclaimed.

"But I think the Huns coming to negotiate peace today is the obvious result of recent events," You Miao countered.

Abruptly, You Miao realized that he was always opposing Tang Xin, who was the leader of the Jiangnan gentry. Every time Tang Xin said something, You Miao would counter him—so much so that he actually now felt a little sheepish.

However, what needed to be said had to be said—and if Sun Yu wouldn't say anything, then You Miao would have to. He knew that every time he opened his mouth at court, everyone would silently curse him "motherfucker"; maybe even Ping Xi, Li Yan, and his group thought him to be impeccably annoying. But who didn't act like this sometimes? Certain things were better said plainly, rather than left hidden behind partial accounts of the truth.

Zhao Chao gave a nasal grunt, obviously unsure.

Ping Xi spoke up, "General Nie wants to ally with the Huns to fight the Tartars. If we have the Huns' assistance when we start the war, we could

obliterate the Tartar forces."

Lin Zhengtao scoffed. "Then what do we do about the terms they've presented? Cede the West Liang region to the Huns, just like that?"

No one uttered a sound.

Seeing that everyone was thinking the same thing, You Miao decided he might as well just say it out loud: "We can just break our word, no?"

As soon as he said it, no one knew whether to laugh or cry.

You Miao added, "What? My lords, isn't that what you're all thinking? I just said it first."

The mood within the hall subtly changed—it had been oppressively gloomy, but now everything suddenly felt like a farce. Even Zhao Chao wasn't able to hold back his laughter.

"A magnificent, upstanding nation that goes back on its word. What about our dignity?!" Lin Zhengtao said coldly.

You Miao replied indifferently, "When the gentlemen fled south, there was no such 'magnificent, upstanding nation' to speak of. The Yanbian Armistice from two hundred years ago is now nothing more than scrap paper."

"Breaking our word is fine," Sun Yu said at last. "But from this old man's point of view, that means we will have to thoroughly decimate both the Tartars *and* the Huns."

Silence blanketed the hall once more. Everyone knew deep down that the Huns couldn't be trusted in the least. The Yanbian Armistice was a signed agreement that promised non-aggression for two hundred years, but at the end of the day, it'd done nothing to make the Barbarians hold back on their encroachment. That "trust" had been based on nothing more than a piece of paper, and any reason could be reason enough to start a fight. The key, however, lay in the timing and the situation at hand.

Even the smallest error in judgement regarding the state of affairs could spell the fall of a nation, which was why this proposed alliance with the Huns made Zhao Chao hesitant. The question was *when* to fall out with them, and *how*.

"Why don't we have the Hun emissary join our discussion?" Zhao Chao said. "Summon General Huwei to court, and then we will see the Hun emissary."

The hall remained in contemplative silence, and it didn't take long before Li Zhifeng entered. He didn't say anything, and only stood to the

side. Following him was Li Yan, who brought the emissary with him. Zhao Chao withdrew behind the screen, leaving Sun Yu to receive the emissary. The emissary gave a huge spiel and then handed Sun Yu a document, which You Miao took instead.

The emissary jabbered on quite haughtily, and translation fell to the scholar that Li Yan had brought along. “Chanyu Kujula is amenable to lending Your Majesty a path for Tianqi to deploy its armies to the Central Plains...”

Li Zhifeng said something frostily in the Barbarian tongue, and the hall fell quiet. The emissary turned his eyes to Li Zhifeng, seemingly afraid, and then Li Zhifeng took another step forward as he casually pulled out his blade. This startled everyone, and they watched, alarmed, as Li Zhifeng set his blade next to the emissary’s neck.

With Li Zhifeng’s eyes locked on him, the emissary trembled in fright. Although You Miao tried shooting Li Zhifeng a look, no one in the hall dared to stop him.

Someone frantically called, “General Li, there’s no need to rush into violence. What did he say?”

Eyes still firmly locked on the emissary, Li Zhifeng answered, “He told us to fight Hemetir, but that the Huns will help neither side. The path-lending fee is thirty thousand taels of gold, one thousand bolts of silk, and five hundred thousand bushels of grain.”

“And what did you say?” You Miao asked darkly.

Li Zhifeng replied, “I said, ask Kujula—before coming out, did he tell you that Hemetir once lost to my father’s sword? If he is unwilling to send troops, then don’t blame me and General Nie for annihilating the Huns before we take out the Tartars. The Xianbei army’s end will be yours as well!”

The emissary said something in a low voice, which Li Zhifeng harshly rebuked. After the emissary nodded, Li Zhifeng sheathed his blade and ceased speaking.

With this, the situation instantly reversed. Sun Yu contemplated for a moment before he unhurriedly spoke up.

“Tell him to give this reply to the Chanyu: if he desires an alliance, it will be impossible for him to remain neutral—unless the Huns don’t believe General Nie can defeat Hemetir.”

After a pause, he added, “Whether Hemetir is defeated will directly affect the succession of Queen Baoiin and the little prince. If the Chanyu is genuine in his desire to talk peace, please show us more good faith. Since you are a senior official in the Chanyu’s administration, why not stay for a few more days? I will send someone else to deliver the message.”

The interpreter transmitted Sun Yu’s message, and the emissary’s eyes flashed—he hadn’t expected he’d be detained. He looked at the crowd of officials, then at Li Zhifeng. Evidently, Li Zhifeng was the only one he feared, and he could but nod.

Once the guards took the man away, Zhao Chao re-emerged from behind the screen. After a brief discussion with the officials, the assembly was dismissed; in order to continue, they had to wait for the second message from the Huns. It was clear to You Miao that Sun Yu had determined the nation’s survival depended on this matter. Since Sun Yu had stepped in to act, it would be left to You Miao to manage. There would be no more opportunities for You Miao to devise any alternate strategies.

After exiting the palace, You Miao went to the army camp. Winter days were short and nights were long; most of the soldiers were idle, with not much to do. They were warming themselves by the campfires, awaiting the new year. Li Zhifeng was also sitting at a firepit in full army gear, staring into space.

“What are you thinking about?” You Miao asked.

“You.”

Li Zhifeng certainly was frank. You Miao laughed.

“Looks like you’ll have to go on an expedition again.”

Li Zhifeng nodded and pointed at the map hanging in the commander’s tent. You Miao approached it to take a look. It was all offense routes that Nie Dan had already determined, and the vanguard targeting the Tartars had already been arranged—planted on the line was a marshal flag marked with the word “Li.”

“Nie-da-ge wants to head north to fight a decisive battle with the Tartars, and use the chance to reclaim the southern area of the Central Plains,” Li Zhifeng explained.

“He’s striking too fast,” You Miao said, sounding worried. “Even if Zhao Chao wants to fight, there might not be enough rations.”

Li Zhifeng didn’t comment, and only opened his arms. You Miao went over and sat on his lap, and the two cuddled in silence.

After a while, Li Zhifeng asked, “Can Tang Hui still fight?”

“I don’t know,” You Miao mumbled. “I’m not sure what he said, but the Hanlin Academy is waiting for the right time to draft a statement and announce to the world that the enemy has released Tang-da-ge.”

“Mn.”

Remembering what Zhao Chao had said the day before, You Miao chuckled. “Yesterday, san-ge suddenly asked me how long the two of us have been together.”

“Five years,” Li Zhifeng said quietly.

You Miao grinned. “Who knows why he asked me that so out of nowhere.”

Li Zhifeng said, “He can’t bear to lose you; he’s scared I’ll take you away. But he also has no choice.”

The serious tone of Li Zhifeng’s answer made You Miao feel a little awkward. Zhao Chao used to treat him with an affection which certainly carried *that* sort of intention—but he’d rejected Zhao Chao time and again, directly and indirectly. After running into a metaphorical wall so many times, Zhao Chao had since stopped pressing the issue. You Miao had thought Zhao Chao was a sensible sort; that he wouldn’t do anything to cross the line anymore—but Li Zhifeng still caught on nonetheless.

“Even then, he wouldn’t force me to do anything. You don’t have to take it to heart,” You Miao said.

“He’s a man with a heavily weighed mind,” Li Zhifeng said. “He won’t tell you anything; it’s all hidden deeply. He remembers everyone who’s treated him well, and poorly.”

That comment made You Miao a little uneasy, but Li Zhifeng changed the subject and stopped talking about Zhao Chao.

“Time to set out again.”

“Yeah,” You Miao said helplessly. “It’ll probably be a long fight this time. We’ll have to part again for a while.”

Although the two were both officials—one civil, the other military—they were usually still able to spend time together on a regular basis since they were both based out of Maocheng. However, the northern campaign would launch as soon as spring arrived next year, and Li Zhifeng would very likely be gone for months. The manpower and resources required for the campaign could definitely not be compared to the previous small skirmishes, or the quelled peasant rebellions. They were concerned about

this turning into a long, drawn-out war, where no one could leave or pull out.

A month later, Zhao Chao and the Hun king, Chanyu Kujula, came to an agreement: the Huns would lend horses to Tianqi, and Li Zhifeng would be marshal. They would also allow Li Zhifeng to pass through the hinterlands of Mount Qi. Come spring next year, Tianqi would deploy three forces led by Nie Dan, Li Zhifeng, and Tang Hui respectively. They would divide into the three groups—left flank, right flank, and center leading the way—and mount a joint attack on Hemetir's iron cavalry of fifty thousand in their mountain encampment.

Never did You Miao expect that Zhao Chao would put all of his eggs in one basket, and even send Tang Hui out to the frontlines. However, since Zhao Chao trusted Tang Hui, it wasn't You Miao's place to say much more—though many civil officials did argue to hell and back about whether a blind general could command an army. In the end, it was Tang Hui who silenced the court's protests—with his eyes blindfolded, he was able to land a decisive hit upon the Imperial Army flag that fluttered beyond Wumen Gate with an arrow from his bow.

Nie Dan chose to set out in the fourth month, which was the rainy season in the Central Plains. The rivers rose sharply at this time of year, and once Mount Qi entered its own rainy season, swamps would emerge throughout the terrain and greatly limit the mobility of Hemetir's cavalry.

Thus came early spring. Showers fell continuously across Jiangnan, finally sweeping away the droughts of the year before. It was through the haze of this misty rain that Li Zhifeng assembled his troops and set out to war, and this time, You Miao wasn't able to follow them.

After spring arrived, Sun Yu's health continued to worsen; with bouts of rheumatism and coughing. You Miao had taken charge of economic and political affairs at the Administration Chamber while Tang Bo acted as support. Sun Yu had gradually stopped attending court, so You Miao took on the burden of the aftermath regarding Jiangnan's reform. Thankfully, all the farmers had received their promised land and seed from each of the prefectural and county governments, and no unforeseen events had cropped up.

Prior to the expedition, Li Zhifeng had returned to the estate a few times. When he did, You Miao would temporarily drop the things he had on hand to spend the days with him. Normally, You Miao wouldn't have

worried so much—after all, he knew Li Zhifeng was an undefeated God of War; one who could return victorious no matter whom he fought, or where, or when. But this time, the man he would be facing was Hemetir.

Although Nie Dan was the one taking charge as the grand marshal commanding the three armies instead of Li Zhifeng, Hemetir was nevertheless a venerated military powerhouse beyond the frontier. Moreover, he was already an acclaimed grand general when Li Zhifeng was still but a child. And most importantly—his martial might had always overshadowed that of the Quanrong. If there was one obstacle Li Zhifeng couldn't overcome, it would be Hemetir.

You Miao mumbled, "I'm really worried about you."

"Stay in Maocheng," Li Zhifeng said to him. "You being at court will help me so much more than accompanying me on the expedition."

You Miao sighed. In the past few days, he had helped Li Zhifeng pack his bags for the campaign. Now sitting side by side under a tree on a hillside at Riverwave Estate, the two huddled together and watched the lush green meadows below where the tenant farmers were bent low, sowing the fields. All of Jiangnan would surely have a good and abundant harvest this year; no more people would die of starvation.

Still worried, You Miao questioned, "How sure do you think Nie-da-ge is on winning?"

"You've asked me that for the tenth time," Li Zhifeng said with a rare smile. Seeing You Miao's exasperated look, he added, "With you in charge at court, the victory of this war is certain."

You Miao could only nod. He was also aware that he couldn't accompany the army for this campaign; otherwise, issues could easily arise with no one at court. Li Zhifeng would be out commanding the army, while the imperial court would become You Miao's own battlefield.

After much contemplation and mulling, You Miao removed the jade pendant from his neck and wound it around Li Zhifeng's instead.

"Let me give you this."

"Mn."

Holding You Miao in his arms, Li Zhifeng kissed him softly on the lips.

A spring breeze blew from the estate behind them. The sight of the shimmering golden fields of rapeseed flowers bestowed the two of them with a curious feeling—one that sprouted from beneath the earth below.

"You must come back alive," You Miao mumbled.

“Match with an adversary face to face and the brave will emerge victorious,” Li Zhifeng recited softly.

Understanding, You Miao flashed a knowing smile.

The next day, the great army set out. Their departure from Yang Prefectural City was done in secret; even Zhao Chao didn’t show up to send them off. In case the news of Li Zhifeng’s leave leaked and the Tartars were alerted, the entire defense force of Yang Prefecture was replaced by new recruits, headed by Ping Xi as the temporary commander.

That spring, Sun Yu’s illness took a turn for the better, and he was able to take charge once more at the Administration Chamber.

[Chapter 51]

On the third of the fourth month, the first summer rain fell on Jiangnan. You Miao prayed nonstop, and thankfully, there weren't any major floods. Ensuring the safety of the year's harvests would be the greatest mercy the heavens could grant Tianqi.

"Report—!"

The Ministry of War had sent a messenger to deliver war reports to the Administration Chamber, and when You Miao took the very first one, he was shaking inside and out.

Tang Hui, Nie Dan, and Li Zhifeng each had sent individual reports, and copies were sent to the Ministry of War, the palace, and the Administration Chamber respectively. You Miao first looked at the army's movement, and learned that the Imperial Army led by Tang Hui and the Yang Prefectural Army led by Li Zhifeng had both reached the foot of Mount Qi; they had joined with the main force of Nie Dan's Northern Expedition Army.

Tang Hui was in charge of the Son of Heaven's battle banner, representing Zhao Chao's will to personally fight. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng had entered the Hun's military stronghold alone, and re-emerged with a cavalry of two thousand overnight.

This was the secret agreement Zhao Chao and the Hun Chanyu had reached. Of course, the Huns would never dare tell outsiders that they were allying with the Hans to fight the Tartars, so they disguised themselves as part of the Tianqi army and temporarily went under Li Zhifeng's wing to assist in battle. The Hun cavalry of two thousand would be responsible for guerrilla attacks, and would be specifically used to obliterate Hemetir's patrol troops.

You Miao quickly finished running through the reports, then opened Li Zhifeng's personal letter. It read: "*All is well. Miss you every night.*" You Miao's highly-strung heart finally relaxed, and he went to the palace to meet with Zhao Chao.

Many of civil officials, including Ping Xi and Zhao Chao, were in the middle of formulating plans and planning on how to inform Nie Dan of the next move. However, You Miao shut them all down. At a time like this, command of the warfront should be given to Nie Dan alone—they should allow him to make the decisions, and refrain from saying anything.

The rainy season arrived half a month later, and torrential rain poured from the heavens. Nie Dan and Tang Hui's troops confronted Hemetir in close combat for the first time in a night raid.

When the war report reached the imperial court, the hall erupted. Zhao Chao was too good at hiding things; there were still quite a number of officials who weren't in the know. When the messenger kneeled and reported the news, You Miao's sight went black. The words *"May Heaven watch over our Emperor"* still echoed in his ears.

"Military rations *cannot* be delayed," You Miao said. "A good harvest is certain this year; food supplies must immediately go to the frontlines."

Many months later, military rations were becoming stressed. Zhao Chao issued a levy order, and acquired seven thousand bushels of grain. You Miao had wanted Xie Hui to open up the imperial stores, but Xie Hui informed him that they were empty.

"Last year's disaster relief depleted the reserves, not to mention this year's distribution to tenant households," Xie Hui said.

"Then open the state treasury and buy surplus from the people," You Miao said. "As much as we can; on credit, if we must."

The months went by in a flash, and soon, it was already the eighth month of the year. Nearly half a year had passed since Li Zhifeng had set out in the third month. For the sake of this war, Zhao Chao had basically leaned on the power of the whole nation and called nearly eight hundred thousand people to arms. Meanwhile, Nie Dan won battles by employing ingenious, unpredictable military maneuvers. But after several battles against Hemetir, he withdrew his forces and returned to defending Mount Qi.

For four months, the army did not move, biding its time. In that time, Jiangnan collected the late harvest—all of which entered the military food stores to support the army of eight hundred thousand.

A day's delay meant a day's worth of military rations. The court was becoming uncertain, and there was growing opposition to Nie Dan's strategy. The ministers begged Zhao Chao over and over, inquiring after Nie Dan's next step—if he had no plans to fight, then they should call the army back. Otherwise, the court would not be able to supply them enough grain. Winter was coming. If this war dragged until spring next year, Jiangnan's food supplies would be exhausted.

But Zhao Chao bore all of this pressure, and quelled all such talk.

“General Nie is waiting.” It was not the first time You Miao had explained this.

“Waiting for what?!” Lin Zhengtao demanded. “Waiting for all the food to be eaten? He’s been waiting from spring to autumn—the rainy season is over, what more is he waiting for?!”

“I don’t know. The report didn’t say anything, only that they’re waiting for the opportune moment,” You Miao replied

“Lord You, I understand General Nie’s mode of operation, but food supplies truly are exhausted,” Xie Hui said. “Keep this up and rations will only last until the twelfth month at most.”

“After next year’s early harvest, we can hang on for another six months,” You Miao countered.

The ministers at court really couldn’t deal with You Miao anymore. Xie Hui tried again, “Lord You, we opened fire at the Tartars in the third month; it is now the tenth month. A whole seven months have passed. The remaining rations will only last until the twelfth month. If the army doesn’t return by then, the soldiers will miss the opportunity to enact tuntian[7]... And the early harvest won’t come for another several months.”

“I know, I know,” You Miao said helplessly.

These were the daily pile of problems that Zhao Chao had to deal with whenever he came to court—all of the noise revolved around the issue of rations. It wasn’t just the Tartars who’d become worn down over these seven long months; even the imperial court had become like a battalion of exhausted soldiers. Every time the matter was discussed in the morning assembly, it would end inconclusively. Many times, Zhao Chao had wanted to urge Nie Dan to hasten his speed with battles, but was stopped by You Miao every time.

It was deep autumn once more. You Miao paced back and forth beneath the moon that had risen to mid-sky, then stopped and pulled out a sheet of paper to write: *“When will battle start?”* But after a moment’s thought, he scrunched it up and tossed it into the water.

“Shaoye,” Changyuan called with a low voice from outside.

Immediately, You Miao looked up, knowing Changyuan would only call him at this time if there was news from the frontlines—and major news at that.

“What’s the news?” he urgently asked.

Changyuan pushed in the door and entered, bringing with him an officer from the Ministry of War, who in turn led in another soldier.

"Lord You, Minister Ping has instructed a lower official to bring you this man; he is a soldier from the Northern Expedition Army," the officer said.

You Miao didn't recognize the other soldier, but he figured he was a captain from the Yang Prefectural Army.

As soon as he entered, the messenger said, "Lord You, General Huwei has sent me to inquire why the rations haven't made it yet. The frontlines are at their limit."

"Go back and tell Li Zhifeng that I'm out of ideas, too," You Miao had to say. "We've prompted them too many times, and the Ministry of Revenue is also doing their best to allocate grain. We'll release it in the next few days."

"And cold-resistant clothing," the messenger said. "The men have nothing to wear to ward against the harsh cold. We can't fight like this. Many soldiers have cracked hands and feet from the frost."

"We've already gotten the Ministry of Revenue to make preparations. Just wait a few more days; at least fourteen thousand jackets still need to be sown. They'll be delivered as soon as they're done."

The messenger added, "There are two thousand Hun soldiers under General Huwei. Our own people are easy to persuade, but we're afraid the Huns won't wait, which is why I was sent to make a trip to the Ministry of War. Minister Ping said this matter will have to wait until the morning assembly tomorrow, but General Huwei instructed me beforehand that if the Ministry of War can't resolve the issue, then we'll have no choice but to come find you at the Administration Chamber, sir."

If Li Zhifeng had personally sent a messenger to request rations and warm clothing, You Miao knew that had to mean things were urgent. He contemplated for a moment, then turned to Changyuan.

"Changyuan, take this man to the estate. Tell Lord Uncle to keep enough grain for us to survive the winter, and give the rest to the warfront. I'll write another note for you to take to the Ministry of War. Tell Ping Xi to release all the clothing he has on hand. If His Majesty asks questions, I will take all responsibility."

Since the imperial court couldn't be counted on, he had no choice but to fill in the holes from his own wallet for now. You Miao was endlessly bitter

about that fact, and could only pray Nie Dan would win the war soon.

He went to bed feeling uneasy that night, and at sigeng time, the messenger returned.

"Lord You, have you gone to bed?" he called from the window.

You Miao blearily climbed out of bed. Travel-worn and with exhaustion coloring his face, the messenger bent one knee to the ground.

"The men thank Lord You for saving their lives..."

You Miao quickly helped him to his feet. "It's my duty; you don't need to be like this."

The messenger pulled a letter from his robes and respectfully presented it to You Miao. "This is General Li Zhifeng's personal letter. I was in too much of a hurry to inquire about the rations; I forgot to present it. Pray my lord forgive me."

After taking the letter, You Miao told the messenger to rest for the remainder of the night, but the man didn't even take a sip of tea before hurrying off without pause. Standing there in the room, You Miao felt a swarm of mixed emotions surging through him. Suddenly, another servant came to inform him that Sun Yu was awake and had summoned him.

Sun Yu hadn't been able to rest properly recently, something You Miao was aware of. Although Sun Yu didn't say so out loud, there were matters weighing down his mind—the court officials were all anxious, but he was even more so than anyone else. Judging from the present situation, however, it would appear that the only one *not* on edge was You Miao. You Miao's trust in Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng was nearly blind, but Sun Yu's sight was farther than his, and much broader. If this war wouldn't end, it would provoke a series of consequences severe enough to collapse the entire reign of Tianqi.

Pulling on his outer robe, You Miao entered Sun Yu's room.

"New war reports?" Sun Yu asked from where he lay in bed.

The ruckus earlier had probably roused Sun Yu. Because the messenger had visited twice, he worried there were changes to the situation, which was why he had summoned You Miao.

"The warfront is urging for rations," You Miao replied. "And a personal letter from Li Zhifeng was delivered."

Sun Yu grunted in response and sighed. Then he coughed a few times. You Miao was about to stand to assist him, but he waved him off and said

instead, “My old eyes are blurry, I can’t see properly anymore. Read it out loud for me.”

Under the room’s lamplight, You Miao opened Li Zhifeng’s letter and murmured, “Ziqian.”

He read, “Nie-da-ge is trying to set up traps. We are now in a critical situation—the men can eat sparingly, but food for the Hun soldiers cannot stop.

“Hemetir is very astute. After many battles, he still refuses to withdraw all of his forces to the mountain, which makes it difficult for us to proceed with the raid plans. On the fifth of last month, Tang Hui caught a Tartar scout, and after interrogating him, we learned that the Tartar Khan has already reached the end of his life. Hemetir is anxious to extricate himself, so we’ve come to the joint decision that even if we do not attack, we will still pin his forces down and leave him no chance to return home.

“Prince Gergen will face a fight for the throne when Kuzha Khan dies, which will surely be a melee. The more anxious Hemetir becomes, the more likely he will eventually present an opening. This is what Nie-da-ge is waiting for. The Huns have already sent an emissary to Da’an to support Queen Baoiin in taking the throne, and once Hemetir loses his cool, Tang Hui and I will go around Mount Qi to carry out the attack. When the wind blows and all is dry, Nie-da-ge will set the mountain on fire.

“My elder brother has already learned of my office in Tianqi from the Tartars. The Quanrong tribe may move southward to fight alongside the Barbarian Tribes to overtake the Central Plains. If the Quanrong forces cross the border, the situation...may change.”

This is not good news, You Miao thought, and looked up worriedly at Sun Yu. Sun Yu’s expression remained calm, however.

“Keep reading.”

You Miao continued, “Should the situation become irreparable...then I can only...only...”

“Only what?” Sun Yu questioned. You Miao didn’t answer, however, and he pressed, “When the messenger came, where had already he visited?”

You Miao shook his head blankly, and Sun Yu said, “To prevent future information leaks, tell Li Zhifeng that any matters involving the war situation or plans of attack must not be written in personal letters.”

“Yessir.” You Miao nodded.

“Go back and rest now,” Sun Yu ordered.

You Miao heaved a sigh. The news Li Zhifeng's letter had brought was not anything good, and the most significant point mentioned was Quanrong involvement. The Five Barbarian Tribes and the Tartars weren't enough; now there was a Quanrong tribe, too—what a huge mess.

That night, You Miao tossed and turned and didn't sleep a wink. When the day broke, a boy servant came to wake him and informed him that Sun Yu had gone to attend court—despite the fact that the court never did anything except continue to seesaw the food supplies issue. You Miao himself had already emptied his own granaries; whatever surplus he had was given to the Ministry of War to fill the deficiency at the warfront. Nonetheless, the issue wasn't resolved in the least—in fact, supplies were still far from sufficient.

The morning assembly was filled with the usual arguments. After they were all dismissed, You Miao followed Zhao Chao back to the imperial study. He reported the matter of the Quanrong moving southward, yet Zhao Chao only answered with a nonchalant, "Got it."

The response instantly put You Miao on guard. *Got it*? Did Zhao Chao already know? Did he have other channels for information? Or had that personal letter already been examined by the Ministry of War when it was handed to him by the messenger?

You Miao wanted to ask something in order to feel out the truth, but Zhao Chao was not answering any more questions.

"Go back to the Administration Chamber right now and authorize rations for General Nie. This will be the last batch before winter comes. It doesn't matter whether it's enough; it's all Jiangnan can give."

They busied for a whole day that day. All the subsequent news that came from the warfront stated that the army was biding its time—that is, until the twelfth month came once more.

You Miao was lost in thought, staring at a personal letter Li Zhifeng had sent him previously. In the few lines that he didn't recite out loud for Sun Yu, Li Zhifeng had written: *"Should my brother really come down south and join the fight for the Central Plains, the war situation will see a sure and irreversible decline that not even Nie-da-ge will be able to salvage. Either I will return to whisk you away to faraway lands, or die on the battlefield. I await your response; tell me what you desire when you see my letter."*

Whisk him away to faraway lands. You Miao chuckled wryly. Li Zhifeng could abandon the army and take him away, but Nie Dan could not, and Jiangnan's people had nowhere to run. If the marshal Li Zhifeng was to retreat and the Tartars came bearing down, everything would be over.

However, Li Zhifeng and Nie Dan's armies were already stretched to the limit—they had no way of facing a new Quanrong force. If the Tartars and the Quanrong joined together, the war situation would take an unthinkably bad turn. For the first time in his life, You Miao would face a situation so irrevocably deteriorated that even his most valiant efforts couldn't reverse it. In the end, everything had to be left to prayer. He hoped his mother looking down from high above would watch over him and his lover, who was drenched in blood and fighting tooth and nail at the frontlines.

This was the sixth year that he and Li Zhifeng had known each other.

You Miao passed every day on edge. He knew Zhao Chao was also well aware of the situation—everything now counted on the heavens. The days went on, one by one. In military communications, You Miao only included a single verse of poetry in his note: *Our conjugal love, undoubted*.[8]

He should just leave everything in Li Zhifeng's hands; to escape or to die. If his decision was to flee, then he would follow him. If it was to sacrifice for the country, then it would still be an equally simple task to follow him—he'd simply end it all at the estate with a brilliant flash of a sword. The only wish he had for their next lives was that they not be born in a turbulent world; that all would be peaceful. He could live a good, simple life and own a few hectares of humble land; a plain and quiet life.

Sending that letter somehow brought him some calm. After all, this time, everyone had done all that they could.

* * *

The twelfth month passed by them unawares, in spite of the daily torment. Zhao Chao's deeply locked brows never once relaxed.

On the evening of the twenty-seventh, Zhao Chao summoned You Miao to the palace. You Miao had just fought with Tang Bo at the Administration Chamber; the reason being that Tang Bo and the other supervisory secretaries were determined to have Tu Risheng executed. They wanted an imperial edict drafted to that effect. Unable to stop them, You Miao forced

through his own statement to the Ministry of Justice, and it didn't take long before someone was sent from the palace for him.

When You Miao entered the palace, Zhao Chao was standing outside in the garden dressed in a fur coat. Powdery snow fluttered in the air. Zhao Chao had gotten thinner; his eyes were sunken and lifeless, his face gaunt, and there were even a few white hairs entwined in his locks. You Miao himself also looked haggard from the stress of this war. Nonetheless, everyone had the right to complain—except You Miao and Zhao Chao. After all, they were the ones who'd advocated for this war, and the ones who'd forcefully quelled any objections to sending Nie Dan on this campaign.

Everyone said they should leave these events for posterity to comment, but to the victor belong the spoils. If this war ended in defeat, Tianqi wouldn't be far from complete destruction.

You Miao stopped and stood behind Zhao Chao. A long while later, Zhao Chao let out a heavy sigh.

"Let's summon them back."

"Your Majesty, we've come so far. We cannot withdraw," You Miao pleaded.

There hadn't been any more voices of dissent against the northern expedition at court after they entered the twelfth month; at this point, everyone knew that they'd either win or die. If they withdrew now, it would only invite a more aggressive counter-attack from the Tartar army.

"We shouldn't have been so reckless," Zhao Chao said, exhaustion apparent in his voice.

"Your Majesty!" You Miao frowned. "What good is it to think like that at this point?!"

Zhao Chao turned around and locked eyes with You Miao. "You aren't to blame. Who could've predicted this development? But now, Ziqian, you have to listen to me—tell Nie-da-ge to return to court. It's still not too late."

You Miao shook his head slowly. "It *is* too late, Your Majesty."

Zhao Chao furrowed his brows. "Nie-da-ge doesn't know how difficult things are at court. If this drags on, the people won't have anything left to eat! What good would victory do if Jiangnan perished? The people are already saying that we're exhausting all resources to build up our military power. Spring will also soon be upon us; if soldiers don't return to work the fields in the spring, several million more will starve to death!"

“Your Majesty, sometimes it only takes a few short days for victory or defeat to—”

“It’s no use,” Zhao Chao muttered. “We’ve commanded troops before. You’re hoping Nie-da-ge will win, even in the middle of a harsh winter? That would be impossible, even if Sun Tzu[9] himself was reborn to assist. I know his routine; he wants to drag this out until spring next year—until either Kuzha Khan dies, or the next rainy season. Summon them back. We can’t afford to exhaust any more resources. Draft the decree.”

“If the order must be given, then you can draft it yourself, Your Majesty. I don’t dare,” You Miao said.

Zhao Chao shook in anger. “You—!”

You Miao said darkly, “A field commander can make decisions that flout the ruler’s orders. Nie-da-ge won’t accept the edict.”

Unable to suppress his rage, Zhao Chao shouted at You Miao, “Then he might as well throw the last bit of this country away at Mount Qi—!”

You Miao knew Zhao Chao had reached his limit; that he couldn’t take the pressure anymore. He didn’t argue back, and only stood there quietly.

“Summon Li Yan,” Zhao Chao instructed the guard.

“Your Majesty! You mustn’t issue the decree!” You Miao exclaimed anxiously.

But Zhao Chao was beyond exhausted. He unfastened his outer robe and threw it heavily on the ground before collapsing in the study’s chair, closing his eyes. And no matter how You Miao begged, he remained silent without opening his eyes.

Li Yan arrived a short while later. He took a look at You Miao, then at Zhao Chao; figuring that there had been a fight between the two, he stood to the side properly and didn’t say a word. He and You Miao thus remained standing there, keeping Zhao Chao company. By the second half of the night, Zhao Chao seemed to have fallen asleep; he was snoring lightly. You Miao draped the discarded robe over him and signaled to Li Yan that they could leave, and the two retreated from the chamber together.

“What happened?” Li Yan asked in a quiet voice.

“He wants to issue an edict to summon General Nie back,” You Miao replied equally quietly as he closed the door.

Li Yan sighed and shook his head, resigned, and left the palace together with You Miao.

Another three days passed. Zhao Chao's mood had fluctuated during that time, and he had simply stopped listening to warfront news altogether. You Miao, on the other hand, had fretted over military food supplies every single day—what more could he do to collect enough grain for the soldiers to eat? All of their resources had been sent during the last transport; betted away on hopes of victory. The final deadline was fast approaching; they could only hang on for twenty more days, and by then, Nie Dan would have to retreat—whether he liked it or not.

That day, fresh snow was melting for the first time. Upon counting the days, You Miao determined that it was his sixth year back in Jiangnan.

A horse carriage stopped outside the Administration Chamber, and a familiar voice rang out. "I'm here to visit my baby nephew."

Worries temporarily swept away, You Miao hurried out to receive the visitors. Qiao Jue was the first to alight the carriage, hand-in-hand with a young lady.

Smiling, Qiao Jue said, "Miao-zi, I've come to see you! You've gotta eat the New Year's Eve reunion dinner with family, eh."

Behind him, the young lady dismounted, and You Miao rushed over, letting out a shout of, "Er-jie!"

The young lady was indeed You Miao's distant maternal cousin, Qiao Rong. Back in the day, the grand old lord of the Qiao family had three lawful wives. Qiao Zhang, Qiao Jue, and Qiao Ke-er were children from his second wife. The old lord had another lawful son in Jiang Prefecture named Qiao Wei, who was later lost to a plague that swept across the region. And so, his daughter Qiao Rong's wet nurse helped sell the land and sought refuge with Qiao Zhang. When she was young, Qiao Rong had often played together with You Miao; their childhood was spent making merry. However, she'd often suffer disdain from Madam Bai—it couldn't be helped, for she was living under another's roof and was not the Madam's own child. Because of this, Qiao Ke-er helped Qiao Rong pack up her assets and sent her to live at a different estate; one that belonged to Qiao Zhang's maternal uncle.

After a while, Qiao Rong stopped frequenting that side of the family and lived freely—rather happily, even. When Qiao Ke-er passed away from illness, Qiao Rong had come to pay her tribute and wept bitterly. Because of the sibling-like relationship she shared with You Miao, the two were quite emotional when they met again after so many years.

“You’re a high official now, Miao-zi. I don’t even recognize you anymore,” Qiao Rong said with a laugh.

You Miao responded with a small, sheepish smile and tugged at Qiao Rong’s hand, so filled with mixed emotions but not the words to express them. Instead, Qiao Jue was the talkative one as she grinned ear to ear.

“Rong-er hasn’t got much going on in Jiang Prefecture, so I thought I’d have her stay at the estate. Our restaurant in Maocheng just opened, so if anything, she can help get things in order,” Qiao Jue said.

What Qiao Jue really wanted was to have Qiao Rong move in—which was, of course, okay by You Miao. He quickly smiled. “Perfectly fine. You can stay for as long as you want, biaojie.[10] I can’t believe today is New Year’s Eve; I would’ve forgotten had you not reminded me.”

Qiao Rong chuckled with a hand over her mouth. “Well, I haven’t drunk with you for a long time, Miao-zi. I hear you’re so busy that you don’t even have the time to eat anymore. When will be you free to keep jiejie company at the restaurant and drink?”

You Miao couldn’t help but sigh. Ever since his return to Jiangnan—six years ago—he barely called on his relatives. He hadn’t visited the You side of the family who were installed in the side manor at Quan Mountain; he’d never even gone to see how his older brother You Hange was doing at the Ministry of Revenue. When work got busy, it put him in a sorry plight. But since Qiao Rong had come, of course he would keep her company. He went back inside the office to ask for half a day’s leave, citing that he had relatives visiting, and left instructions before he headed to the restaurant in Maocheng with Qiao Jue and Qiao Rong.

Qiao Jue had purchased a property facing the main street a long time ago. When it came to doing business in the imperial capital, there was of course no one in all of Jiangnan who would dare fight You Miao for location. Not only was the land deed approved, every step of the red-taped process bowed to Qiao Jue’s will. In the past year, Qiao Jue had spent a great deal of effort putting the restaurant together, and had named it Moyan Pavilion. It was a place that catered specifically to dignitaries and nobles, providing a spot for them to dine, drink, and discuss matters.

Although Moyan Pavilion was indeed a public restaurant, restaurants were still divided by class. The back of Moyan Pavilion faced the canal behind Maocheng, upon which floated three pleasure barges, upon which grew camellias and black bamboo transplanted from Riverwave Estate.

Much of the restaurant's interior decor consisted of refined items like bamboo curtains, zithers, and wooden furnishings—devoid of any decadent gold-foiled extravagance. Every detail of the restaurant emphasized elegance.

You Miao had worked as an official in Maocheng for nearly two years, but this was the first time that he'd ever had time to see his own restaurant. *This isn't bad*, he thought. *Drink some tea, listen to the zither...* Qiao Rong herself was also a classic Jiangnan beauty, and she naturally exuded an air of celestial transcendence from her seat behind the bamboo curtains—a much preferable aura to that of a worldly boss lady, spoiled by money and fussing all day with an abacus in hand.

"This is a good location. How much are the per day profits?" You Miao asked.

Qiao Rong laughed. "Listen to yourself—money, money, money; all you know is money. The restaurant isn't even open yet."

Caught between laughing and crying, You Miao replied, "Jie, xiao-jiu, you guys don't know, but money is the thing we court officials most lack."

Qiao Jue said, "Look at Miao-zi. When anyone else becomes an official, all they do is filch money from the court to take back home. Our family's hands are clean of such dirty deeds, and instead, we've gotta feed the government with *our* money. Who's ever heard of such a thing?"

Qiao Rong and Qiao Jue laughed at You Miao's expense, but You Miao's only response was to sigh. After they had their bout of laughter, he said, "Biaojie, even if you didn't come, I should've gone to see you. There's just so much work..."

Qiao Rong turned and consoled him. "You're taking your work seriously, and proving yourself to both the emperor above and the people below. I've already received your kind regards simply by you being a good official."

Qiao Jue laughed. "That's it exactly. Right now, both the You and the Qiao families are relying on you. It doesn't matter if you don't call on your relatives; everyone knows that you're doing good work for His Majesty. It's us—your families—who should come call on you and help you out."

Fair enough, You Miao thought. The fates of the You and Qiao families were tied to him right now, and everyone could reap the benefits as long as he didn't fall. From the imperial court above to the local governments below, anyone and anything that had any connection to You Miao got

clearance. Truly, the responsibilities on his shoulders were too great to shirk.

A thin layer of ice had frozen over the surface of the river. Pensive, You Miao watched as the white herons in the far distance flew past. He inquired about the estate, worried that there wouldn't be enough grain left to eat, but Qiao Jue appeared perfectly nonchalant—if grain fell short, they could just grow more; Riverwave Estate had never been afraid of starvation. You Miao relaxed at this.

As the three of them drank a round of plum wine, there was suddenly a commotion outside.

"Lord You! Lord You!" The guard had been stopped outside by the restaurant staff, so he shouted across the hall. "The Ministry of War asks for you! Urgent business—communication from the warfront!"

Violently startled, You Miao almost broke out into cold sweat; he had been jumpy and high-strung lately.

"We've won! General Nie is victorious!" the guard added.

As if struck by lightning, You Miao tripped over the threshold at the door of the restaurant and ran outside, stumbling and staggering—and completely forgetting to put on his boots, his bare foot whacking against a table leg.

"Say it again? Tell me again?" You Miao cried, tugging at the guard.

The guard replied, "Minister Ping sent me to ask for you, Lord You. The people at the Administration Chamber said you might be at Moyan Pavilion —"

"I meant the *warfront news*!" You Miao screamed.

"Yessir, yessir... General Nie's army moved out of Mount Qi and attacked jointly with General Huwei's forces. General Tang cut off the Tartar escape route and General Nie set fire to the mountain, taking advantage of their unpreparedness. Over ten thousand Tartar soldiers burned to death. Our forces are currently in pursuit—"

"Report—!"

Another warhorse dashed from the main road. Couldn't care less to ask further, You Miao ran directly into the street. The rider of the horse recognized him and quickly pulled to a stop, yelling excitedly.

"General Nie is victorious! General Nie is victorious—!"

It was as if You Miao had lost the ability to speak. Stumbling and staggering with a completely empty head, he rushed to the Ministry of War.

The citizens had all come outside. The news of triumph was spreading like wildfire, and soon, it had reached the entire city.

Coincidentally, it was New Year's Eve, right at the end of the year. Every household was passing word that their troops had won. Nie Dan had waited eight whole months to lure the Tartars into Mount Qi, and then set fire to the mountain.

Absolute mayhem had taken hold of the Ministry of War when You Miao arrived. When Ping Xi saw him, he engulfed him in a tight hug, and the two wept and screamed.

Ping Xi cried, "Quick... Wait, why are your feet bleeding? What were you doing?! Quick, come with me to the palace!"

It was then that You Miao finally realized he had cracked his toenail when he was running out and knocked against the table earlier, but he didn't feel any pain despite the bleeding. Immediately, he put on a pair of boots and headed for the palace with Ping Xi. The whole capital city was in an uproar. That night, front-line reports streamed endlessly into the capital like water. On the twenty-ninth of the twelfth month, Nie Dan had set fire to the mountain and Li Zhifeng's force had a faceoff with Hemetir. After Tang Hui joined the attack, they drove the Tartars out of Mount Qi.

Hemetir had never suffered such a massive defeat in his life. Following his retreat from Mount Qi, he encountered Nie Dan in the southwest of the Central Plains as the man moved northward, past the border of West Liang. There, the two armies clashed once more. With only thirty thousand soldiers left in his command, Hemetir was no match for Nie Dan's might; he fled back to the old capital, abandoning the battle. Li Zhifeng gave chase, and in the span of one night, the Tartars had been beaten back hundreds of miles.

The north and south shores of the Yangtze had been reclaimed. The warfront was pushed to the foot of Mount Jun, which was only one hundred and twenty miles south of the old capital. Tang Hui recalled his troops and garrisoned the valley of Mount Jun. This was the best military report of the year, and You Miao finally felt his enormously tense heart relax at the news.

The court ministers congratulated Zhao Chao, whose only response was a slow exhale and a nod. You Miao was the last to arrive at court. Standing outside the great hall, he also nodded at Zhao Chao before he bowed and turned, leaving the palace.

Outside in the yard of the Ministry of War were several exhausted soldiers sitting in the frigid wind. The office building wasn't well-

constructed, and the halls were extremely drafty in winter. The soldiers' winter clothing was ripped, exposing the fluffy reed catkins inside.

When You Miao entered, the soldiers didn't recognize him and only looked over in confusion.

"Have you guys eaten?" You Miao asked.

"Not yet," replied one of the soldiers, who teased, "Little shaoye, are you going to treat your ges?"

Without giving an answer, You Miao went into the hall and called for an attendant. At his summons, an attendant came outside from the back of the building and exclaimed in surprise, "Lord You hasn't had New Year's Eve dinner yet?"

Now that they'd finally learned You Miao's identity, the soldiers quickly stood up to bow, but You Miao told them it was fine and pushed them back down to their seats. He instructed the attendant to buy some food and drinks. Right there in the grand hall of the Ministry of War, the group lit the stove and ate their New Year's Eve dinner.

More messengers arrived, one after the other. In the end, a total of six army messengers came to the Ministry of War.

Pleasantly, You Miao inquired, "How many men have died?"

"Over two thousand four hundred from General Tang's regiment," answered one of the messengers.

Another one responded, "General Huwei's regiment saw the most men sacrifice their lives. Including the Huns, nearly five thousand have died."

You Miao looked at another messenger, and that soldier said, "Marshal Nie's forces lost the least number of men; just over a thousand."

You Miao raised a cup of wine and said, "A toast to your dead brothers."

The eyes of the messengers grew red, and they all raised their cups. A pot of steaming hot lamb sat before them, and everyone stuffed themselves with large mouthfuls of meat and dough bread and drank to their heart's content. They swayed and sang songs with lyrics like "*All around blare the bugles,*"[11] and "*Illuminated is Chang'an, with a moon so bright.*"[12] Throughout the night, You Miao questioned the messengers in detail about the warfront situation—which mountain, which fields, which rivers, how Hemetir was defeated, everything. By the end of the evening, everyone was dead drunk.

Halfway through the night, You Miao vaguely heard someone say, “Why is Lord You here...?” and felt someone carrying him back to his room. But as the night passed, nothing more was said.

On the first day of New Year’s, every household set off firecrackers and celebrated the victory at the frontlines. Zhao Chao didn’t sleep a wink the entire night, and on the morning of the first, he prayed at the divine altar for favorable weather in the coming year, for the peace and prosperity of the country, and for the recovery of the broken nation.

Nie Dan might have fought a victorious battle, but this was only the first step to reclaiming the country. There were many matters to attend to yet. Sun Yu joined Zhao Chao in New Year’s worship and stood for two whole hours in the freezing wind. By the time he returned to the Administration Chamber, he was near collapse and promptly went to rest.

[Chapter 52]

By noon that day, the memorials to the throne had piled into a mountain at the Administration Chamber. Tang Bo and You Miao were in the process of working themselves to their graves when Zhao Chao summoned You Miao to court for business—probably to discuss what actions to take next.

Warfront reports had arrived before noon—Tang Hui would be recalled to Maocheng for debriefing, and his troops would return to Yang Prefecture. The current Yang Prefectural Army was nothing but a husk; it would not be able to withstand another Tu Risheng, should that happen.

You Miao took a glance at Tang Bo and said, "I will go to the palace immediately. The workload is heavy; thank you for your efforts."

Tang Bo nodded. Over the past two years, those at the Administration Chamber had learned that they could not win against You Miao. Gradually, Sun Yu had decreased his involvement in political affairs, while You Miao began acting as the chief and Tang Bo the deputy. The supervisory secretaries initially weren't able to swallow this insult, but slowly, they found that You Miao's temper wasn't so different from Sun Yu's—he was never high-handed or overbearing, edicts that needed to be sealed and returned were handled appropriately, he was open to listening, his decisions were made based on facts and evidence, and he never started disputes.

Thus, they began to accept You Miao. What else could they do otherwise? If they fought him head-on, they couldn't win—You Miao had Zhao Chao protecting him from above, and connections in the military. If they reported him for misconduct without any real evidence, they would only invite an even more ferocious revenge.

You Miao tidied up the memorials on his desk and exited the hall, but headed for Sun Yu's chamber instead—he'd would wait for Sun Yu to wake and ask him to clarify the matters at hand before he went to face Zhao Chao at court.

"Sir?" he called from outside the room.

He was answered by a grunt inside, so he stood properly in the yard to wait for Sun Yu to rise. Yet a moment later, the sound of something crashing to the floor gave You Miao a start.

"Sir!" You Miao cried anxiously, rushing inside the room.

His voice alerted the supervisory secretaries in the front hall who hadn't gone home for New Year's. They dropped whatever they were doing and rushed to Sun Yu's chamber.

Sun Yu was convulsing as You Miao carried him back to bed. The supervisory secretaries had never witnessed anything like this before, and they all stood rooted to the spot in shock. After Tang Bo entered as well, he snapped everyone out of it.

"Everyone, leave the room and open the windows!"

A brazier was burning merrily inside the chamber amidst the winter chill, smothering the room with heat. It dawned on You Miao that it might be stifling the air; quickly, he opened the windows for ventilation. Breathing was a little easier once fresh air poured in. One of the supervisory secretaries who came from a family renowned for medicine hurried over to feel Sun Yu's pulse. He pulled the man's eyelids back to check, and observed his frighteningly pale face.

"A stroke," the supervisory secretary declared. "Inform the palace quickly; get an imperial physician to administer acupuncture."

Lips quivering, Sun Yu gripped You Miao's wrist, as if to attempt to instruct him of something he couldn't communicate.

Burning with worry, You Miao quickly said, "I will go to the palace at once."

Under the watch of every pair of eyes present, he rushed out of the courtyard, hopped onto a horse, and dashed to the palace with great urgency.

This was a year destined to never be tranquil. Sun Yu's illness was so serious he could no longer speak, and knowing this was no small matter, Zhao Chao sent for an imperial physician without delay and went to visit Sun Yu personally. He waited in the courtyard for two hours, gripped with worry. Even after the imperial physician had administered acupuncture, he was unable to give a definite answer regarding Sun Yu's current outlook, so all political matters had to be pushed back.

"The Administration Chamber will temporarily fall under You Miao's direction," Zhao Chao said. "Everything else will proceed as normal. If Political Advisor Sun's illness makes a turn for the better, inform Us at once."

Sun Yu's sudden downturn basically canceled out the good news of the war's victory. Without a choice, You Miao took up the reins at the

Administration Chamber. But as he took the chief position, he gradually came to realize that Sun Yu had already begun the process of relinquishing power—even without him present, the Administration Chamber didn't seem to go through any major changes.

On the eighth day of the new year, Zhao Chao ordered Tang Hui and the great general Li Zhifeng to transfer back from the frontlines, while commanding Nie Dan to continue defending the border. It'd now been almost a year since You Miao and Li Zhifeng had separated—You Miao couldn't help but miss him dearly, but unfortunately, so many political matters had piled up after Sun Yu had fallen ill that he didn't have the time to get away.

The day the Yang Prefectural Army returned, Maocheng's cheers were thunderous. People poured into the streets, and every household was banging gongs and setting off firecrackers. The exuberant air permeated every corner of every street. Standing at the lead of the court officials, Zhao Chao waited outside the city gates, yet the one who returned wasn't Li Zhifeng—it was Nie Dan.

Despite having just won a major battle, Nie Dan had no trace of joy on his face. The moment he dismounted the horse, he dropped one knee to the ground in salute.

"This subject left his post without authorization; pray His Majesty punish me," he said.

You Miao couldn't help but feel disappointed, but he knew Nie Dan had his reasons for not letting Li Zhifeng return. It made no difference at this point to wait a bit longer, so he had to accept it.

Zhao Chao, however, only smiled in delight. "What crimes has General Nie committed by forcing out Tartar thugs? Please rise."

He personally welcomed Nie Dan into the city, and the civil and military court officials followed behind them. At the palace hall that day, Nie Dan provided a pertinent account of the current war situation. Sure enough, the reason why he didn't send Li Zhifeng back was because the Chanyu might turn his back on them at any time. Li Zhifeng was needed to hold down the fort at Mount Qi.

"We already have plans in mind," Zhao Chao said cheerfully. "The three generals have accomplished heroic deeds in this war. Rewards will be conferred accordingly upon their return to court—"

Nie Dan cut him off, however, and cupped his hands in respect. “Your Majesty, after the battle, the Tartars sent us a messenger in secret. It’s extortion on the surface, but truthfully, they are afraid to fight and want us to cease fire. This subject has drafted a memorial to this effect.”

Complete silence befell the palace hall. Zhao Chao didn’t look pleased, and something jolted in You Miao’s head from out of the blue and sent the gears in his brain turning rapidly. From the few words Nie Dan had spoken, You Miao instantly gauged the current situation. The word “extortion” had been the thing to raise You Miao’s alarm—what could the Tartars possess that would allow them to extort Tianqi?

Not daring to let Nie Dan speak a single word, You Miao took a step forward and stopped him as soon as he reached into his robes for the memorial to the throne. “General Nie has returned triumphant. I imagine you must be tired from the journey. Why not go back to the Ministry of War to rest and work out the transfer...”

Zhao Chao hadn’t quite processed the situation just yet, and You Miao took advantage of this delay to shoot looks at Nie Dan nonstop, shaking his head minutely with deeply furrowed brows. Nie Dan exhaled deeply, and in the end, he didn’t pull out the memorial.

Alas, the outrage was postponed but not canceled. After court was dismissed that day and the relevant persons gathered at the imperial study, Zhao Chao threw Nie Dan’s memorial draft to the ground heavily. You Miao, Li Yan, and Ping Xi didn’t dare to utter a single sound.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Zhao Chao’s voice was frosty.

The three hadn’t seen the contents of the memorial yet, but they all had an idea of what it might say.

Zhao Chao roared angrily, “Where’s Nie Dan?!”

“To answer Your Majesty,” Ping Xi replied cautiously, “General Nie is still waiting in the side hall.”

Zhao Chao drew in a deep breath and said, “You are all dismissed.”

You Miao’s heart was pounding furiously in his chest. Never had he ever imagined that the first memorial Nie Dan would submit upon his return would be to urge Zhao Chao to bring back the two captured emperors. The matter was a sore spot that triggered Zhao Chao, and it was easy to guess how it had come up—the Tartars had been driven into a corner, so they sent a messenger bearing a threat: should Nie Dan continue his pursuit, they would kill Tianqi’s two imprisoned emperors in the north.

You Miao exchanged a look with Ping Xi and Li Yan, but just when they were about to retreat from the study, Zhao Chao said, “You Miao stays. Ping Xi, call Nie Dan over.”

Thus, You Miao remained. But at a time like this, even he didn’t dare say anything out of line. Zhao Chao’s face was dark as he paced back and forth in the study. Moments later, there was the sound of footsteps and Nie Dan entered the room. You Miao immediately went to close the door.

Sure enough, Zhao Chao flipped over the entire imperial desk in front of Nie Dan with an enormous huge crash!

Visibly livid and shaking, Nie Dan’s face was also a ghastly, stormy shade. He and Zhao Chao glared at each other, neither backing down. After a terrifying silence, it was Zhao Chao who spoke first.

“We can behead you on the basis of this memorial alone,” he threatened through gritted teeth.

Emanating a stronger might that staunchly subdued the emperor’s authority, Nie Dan took a step forward. Zhao Chao cowered in spite of himself, and almost took a step back.

Nie Dan said darkly, “This subject is only doing his duty. If Your Majesty wants to behead me, then go right ahead.”

“Do you really think We don’t dare kill you?!” Zhao Chao shouted angrily.

“Calm your anger, Your Majesty,” You Miao immediately urged. “General Nie has just returned with victory in hand. Even if Your Majesty won’t consider his accomplishments, Your Majesty should still...still...”

Zhao Chao sneered and threw the memorial to the throne in front of Nie Dan.

“*Your Highness*. The Tartars are asking to negotiate peace. If we refuse, they will kill your father and your elder brother,” Nie Dan stated.

Being called by his past title made Zhao Chao jerk. You Miao gave a silent cry of dismay, but Nie Dan didn’t seem afraid in the least and took another step forward. He pulled the imperial desk up and straightened it, putting it back in place before he slowly spoke.

“Da-ge will give you this one piece of advice: if you do not wish to become a sinner in the annals of history, reviled by future generations, then do your duty.”

Even Zhao Chao’s breathing shuddered. Nie Dan took a step back and shot You Miao a look.

“I only hope you still remember what you swore to me and to Mister Sun,” he added.

As soon as he said that, You Miao was instantly able to guess at its meaning. Before he ascended the throne, what did Zhao Chao swear to Nie Dan? To Sun Yu?! Did he swear he would bring back Zhao Zhuo and abdicate?!

Zhao Chao countered coldly, “Do you think that elder brother of mine can command this shattered nation?!”

“The Heaven, the Earth, the Ruler, the Family, the Teacher! There is a proper order!” Nie Dan exclaimed furiously. “You are only in this position temporarily—how can you overtake the rightful master?! Your father and your elder brother are above you, and the right to rule lies with them. If you do not bring them back, it *will* be an act of perfidy!”

His words made Zhao Chao nervous, and he yelled, “Guards!”

“Guards!” Nie Dan yelled, too. “Throw this general in jail so every official at court will know what happened!”

“Your Majesty, you mustn’t!” You Miao cried.

Zhao Chao had only shouted for guards on reflex, but You Miao knew that if he remained silent for much longer, this fight would become an unsalvageable situation.

“We’ve still got much time to discuss this in the future, General Nie,” You Miao quickly interjected. “There’s no need to be like this.”

Zhao Chao panted heavily as he watched Nie Dan.

The guards had already arrived outside the door, so You Miao instructed them, “Send General Nie back to rest.”

Nie Dan gave a quick cup of hands in You Miao’s direction, then gave Zhao Chao a subject’s salute before he turned and left in a whirl of sleeves.

After calming down, You Miao looked at Zhao Chao—who sat dazedly in the royal chair, looking as though he’d lost half of his remaining years of life after that shouting match with Nie Dan.

A long time passed before Zhao Chao asked him, “You Ziqian, what do you think should be done?”

Standing there, You Miao could feel nothing but the cold sweat that drenched his back.

Zhao Chao looked up and stared at him. Then, enunciating each word clearly, he said, “Do not forget what you promised me.”

Of course You Miao remembered what he had promised Zhao Chao once upon a time. This was the hardest question he'd ever had to answer in his life—there was no room for a single wrong word, and most importantly, he could not give Zhao Chao the impression that his words contradicted his real thoughts.

He sighed and said, "What must come will always come, Your Majesty."

Tiredly, Zhao Chao said, "Every time this matter came to Our mind, We always tried not to let Ourself dwell too much on it. There are always matters for which you can't plan in advance; the most We can do is to act when the inevitable comes. Now tell me—san-ge has always listened to you as he walked this road. So, how will you resolve this for me?"

You Miao contemplated for a moment, then answered, "Delay it."

Without a single doubt, You Miao was on Zhao Chao's side. Back when Sun Yu first subtly raised the subject to him, You Miao was already certain where he stood. The worst-case scenario he had anticipated was a division between court officials: one faction would support Zhao Chao, while the other would ask for the two former emperors to be brought back from the north. But right now, too much news was coming in too fast. Sun Yu was gravely ill and bedridden, unable to voice his stance, and Nie Dan had returned with the Tartars' extortive demand for peace—all of a sudden, they had to hastily clarify where everything and everyone stood.

"This must be Hemetir's strategy: to let us work ourselves into division and chaos," You Miao reasoned. "He wants to end this quickly, so we must not let him have what he wants."

Zhao Chao demanded coldly, "Delay? Delay until when? A timeframe is still needed to resolve this."

You Miao heaved a sigh.

It was quiet inside the study. Right then and there, You Miao decided not to keep things hidden anymore and to air it all out to Zhao Chao. At a time like this, holding anything back would only invite unnecessary suspicions. You Miao knew what Zhao Chao was thinking, so he cut directly to it and helped him analyze the situation.

"Listen to Nie-da-ge and bring back your father and brother," You Miao said. "But before you do, the emissary you send will give your brother a secret edict asking him to issue a declaration of abdication."

"He won't do it," Zhao Chao said.

“He will. All he wants is to live and return to the south. I know this very well,” You Miao said.

Zhao Chao finally truly relaxed. He looked at You Miao gratefully and nodded. “And what happens when they return?”

“Bestow him with the title of Prince of Jiao Prefecture. This way, he won’t be disgraced and your conscience will be clear.”

“But Nie-da-ge won’t agree to it,” Zhao Chao said. “They want him to come back and sit in this chair.”

“Temporarily strip Nie Dan of his military authority. Once everything settles, you can use him anew.” You Miao then added, “Li Zhifeng and I will go talk to the Tartars, and I will personally speak with your brother. Leave this to me. I’ll promise you this, but you have to promise me one thing, too.”

Zhao Chao’s eyes eased, and he regarded You Miao.

You Miao said, “You must not mistreat your brother. Whatever’s on your mind right now, I’ve thought it all before. You know that the same thing happened in my family in the past. No matter how he treated you, he’s still your elder brother in the end.”

Zhao Chao looked stricken, but You Miao continued, “The issue with Nie-da-ge is easy to handle. This span of the year, from spring to autumn, isn’t suitable for more war anyway. Have the soldiers come back to work the fields—supporting our own livelihood is the real first priority. For both business and personal reasons, Nie-da-ge should not open fire in the north.”

“We’ll go with that for now. But you have to ensure Nie-da-ge doesn’t add more to my plate,” Zhao Chao said.

You Miao sighed in relief. With this, there was finally a way to appease both sides. Zhao Chao could continue to be the emperor and Nie Dan’s life was protected; the subsequent clash was evaded and Zhao Chao’s sore point was addressed. You Miao had no doubt that if Zhao Chao didn’t fulfill his promise, Nie Dan would restlessly continue submitting his memorial until they turned on each other and Nie Dan was thrown into the imperial prison.

Now they could only pray Nie Dan wouldn’t say any more, or else he could possibly cause a mutiny in the army. The soldiers should all be returning home—as they had to. Otherwise, there would be no grain to eat this year. The rest of the warfront business could be left to Li Zhifeng, as long as Zhao Chao issued an order under the guise of a reward—he could

name Nie Dan the commander of the Yang Prefectural Army and force him to remain in Maocheng to work the fields with the troops.

"Why don't you start planning for the peace talks now?" You Miao suggested. "I'll go find Nie-da-ge for a chat."

When Zhao Chao nodded his approval, You Miao bowed and withdrew. After he exited the imperial study, he exhaled a long, relieved breath.

* * *

That evening, the snow on the roofs had melted, forming droplets of water that dripped from the edges. By dusk, You Miao had returned to the Administration Chamber and ran into Nie Dan talking to Tang Bo in the courtyard.

"General Nie," You Miao greeted.

Nie Dan nodded minutely. "I've also just come."

Tang Bo explained, "Teacher has awoken from his afternoon nap. I was just about to bring General Nie in."

"I'll take him," You Miao said. "Lord Tang, you can go on home."

Knowing Nie Dan and You Miao had things to discuss, Tang Bo sensibly left. You Miao led Nie Dan to the inner courtyard, not saying a word.

Inside the dim chamber, the smell of urine came from Sun Yu's bed. You Miao went to his bedside and called out in a low whisper, "Sir."

Sun Yu huffed a breath and meekly opened his eyes. Since his teacher's stroke, You Miao had arranged for every treatment he could think of: acupuncture, medication, tuina, and other such methods. However, Sun Yu didn't seem to be getting better. Even raising a finger was difficult for him; all he could manage was slightly moving his eyes. Who knew what thoughts turned in his head?

You Miao pressed close to his ear and said, "General Nie has come to see you."

Sun Yu didn't bother to look up or give any reaction to the information.

Nie Dan approached in a bow and greeted quietly, "Lord Political Advisor."

Although Nie Dan had reached the apex of military rank and held the role of grand marshal, it was only third rank overall—military ranks in Tianqi were much lower than those of civil officials, and Sun Yu was a

grand official of the first rank. After Nie Dan greeted Sun Yu with a subordinate bow, he approached and held his hand.

"I hadn't known you would fall ill at such a time, sir," Nie Dan said. "We only have a few steps left on our road to conquering the north."

You Miao had been listening quietly on the side. There were a few times when he wanted to go, but since Nie Dan didn't say anything, it wasn't appropriate for him to leave. Shortly after, he heard Nie Dan say, "Just as you expected, matters were not that simple. It is obvious that His Highness does not wish to return the position of emperor."

Startled, You Miao used this information to deduce that Zhao Chao had to have made some sort of promise in the year he returned to Jiangnan to ascend the throne with the strong support of Nie Dan and Sun Yu—one military, one civil.

Concluding his report, Nie Dan said, "I will use reason to fight and do my utmost in my duty as a subject. Lord Political Advisor, you must take care of your health; there are still things at court that depend on you in the near future. The country, the people, they all need you."

You Miao knew that what Nie Dan said was half for Sun Yu, and half also for him. But at the moment, he could not explain anything to Nie Dan, nor would it be possible for him to say too much in front of Sun Yu.

"When did he get like this?" Nie Dan finally turned to You Miao and asked.

"New Year's Day," You Miao replied.

Nie Dan inquired about Sun Yu's condition, and You Miao's face grew grim. "The doctor said that he will slowly improve after a period of time."

Nie Dan nodded, then gently patted the back of Sun Yu's hand. "Take care of yourself, Lord Political Advisor," he exhorted, then withdrew from the room.

You Miao followed him out and closed the door behind them, and Nie Dan spoke up again, "Tell me the truth, si-di.[13]"

You Miao sighed and shook his head. Everyone, including You Miao, felt that Sun Yu was now a candle in the wind. Losing the ability to speak after a stroke meant recovery was likely impossible. Besides, Sun Yu was in his seventies—sixty or seventy was already a venerable age for an average senior. Sun Yu had toiled for the country day in and day out without food or rest; the complex political affairs of recent years had taken a hard toll on him.

“If he stops participating in the government and we send him to Riverwave Estate to recuperate, maybe he could slowly recover,” You Miao said. “But to have him continue to exert himself for Tianqi...I think...that’d be too much to ask.”

Nie Dan heaved a sigh, then simply took a seat in the yard, looking pensive.

“In the future, the Administration Chamber will depend on you,” Nie Dan said slowly. “What are your plans?”

“Assist His Majesty, treat the people well, and reassure the public.”

You Miao sat down in front of Nie Dan. It was rare for them to meet like this, so You Miao was determined to have a good talk with him tonight. The last time they had met was at the end of summer the year before; there was too much You Miao had to tell Nie Dan to speak of it all in detail.

Nie Dan started, “Regarding the northern expedition—although the others might not know, your da-ge is well aware that the campaign would never have succeeded had it not been for your efforts in holding down the fort at court; the officials wouldn’t have waited for us. Your da-ge also couldn’t make up his mind about whether to return to court early, but er-di [14] said that those of us on the expedition have nothing to be afraid of with you in court. You believed in us, so naturally, we should believe in you too.”

You Miao smiled and nodded. “It’s His Majesty whose heart was determined. What’s the current situation at the frontlines?”

Nie Dan shook his head and said helplessly, “It’s complicated; one move can affect the whole board. Er-di should’ve been the one to return, and I feel guilty for delaying your reunion for no good reason.”

You Miao quickly consoled him, “You did right; the war takes priority. If anything, I’ll go see him at the frontlines myself after New Year’s is over on the fifteenth...”

“No.” Nie Dan’s expression turned grave. “Right now we depend on you to hold the line at court; you must not leave. Mister Sun is gravely ill and your da-ge really doesn’t know who other than you he can rely on... And thank goodness for you, for withstanding so much and firmly standing your ground at the Administration Chamber.”

Heart heavy, You Miao barely heard half of what Nie Dan said. All the thoughts churning in his mind revolved around how to persuade Nie Dan away from the idea of bringing the two former emperors back. On that night

at Shen Garden when they had all vowed to be brothers, Nie Dan was the only one he wasn't able to see through. Since the beginning, they had met less than they parted, and Nie Dan was a straight shooter who didn't care for luxuries. Now that he thought about it, You Miao realized he knew nothing about him. Likewise, Nie Dan must feel the same regarding him.

They had never shared a friendship close enough to call each other brothers, nor had they ever spent a long time together. You Miao thought he might know Nie Dan less than he knew even Li Yan. Yet in spite of all this, Nie Dan had determined You Miao to be someone he could stake his life on based on the many decisions You Miao had made. And this made him willing to swear to be brothers of a different name with him and Li Zhifeng.

Could two people who knew nothing of each other become sworn brothers? Sure; it was possible in two circumstances: one was for the sake of self-interest, and the second was when ambitions, aspirations, and stances had reached a mutual understanding. Perhaps the latter was what he and Nie Dan had. They were not the same type of people; there was a world of difference between their lives and social ranks. But their ambitions aligned.

Maybe this was what they called "mutual appreciation between the talented."

"Da-ge." After mulling it over, You Miao said, "Why don't you go back and rest? His Majesty was a little too irascible today..."

"I cannot." Nie Dan frowned. "I returned specifically for this matter."

You Miao tried, "But da-ge, you don't know. All of Jiangnan was emptied for that battle. You have to release the soldiers and have them come back to work the fields."

"I know, I'm well aware," Nie Dan said. "But the next battle isn't based on combat. We and the Tartars both need to recuperate. Your da-ge needs you to do something, and it must be done as soon as possible; best if it happens before spring plowing begins."

A thought occurred to You Miao, and he asked, "What is it?"

Nie Dan said, "Although you are now the director of the Administration Chamber, you still don't have enough weight to your standing. I will take the lead and be the face of this, but you will gather the officials—the six ministries, the Hanlin Academy, and the Administration Chamber—and ask them all to sign a petition..."

You Miao was alarmed.

"...to negotiate peace with the Tartars. To have the two emperors lost in the north be brought back, and have His Majesty abdicate to allow the former emperor to succeed the throne." Nie Dan spoke as if he was talking to himself. "The Tartars must let them go, or we will fight to the Central Plains. Because of the recent defeat, Hemetir's reputation in the Tartar clans has plummeted to the point where he has become a laughingstock. The Huns support Queen Baoiin as regent. In order for Prince Gergen to successfully become the Khan, Hemetir will have no choice but to release the Grand Emperor and *His Majesty*."

"..." You Miao was struck speechless.

Nie Dan continued, "You must quickly—"

"No. I can't do it," You Miao said.

Nie Dan's face dropped.

You Miao started, "Nie-da-ge, there is nothing wrong with bringing the two emperors back. But 'dethroning' a ruler is never something a subject should do. This has been true since ancient times. The decision to abdicate is His Majesty's to make. Subjects have no right to dethrone an emperor for the sake of enthroning another."

Nie Dan's expression was gravely dark. "If this isn't settled now, how long will you wait?!"

"How would you have His Majesty settle the matter, if your petition is submitted?" You Miao questioned back.

"When the true emperor returns, he should naturally relinquish the position," Nie Dan demanded coldly. "How else should he settle it?"

You Miao countered sharply, "Do you think the new emperor would keep him around?"

"You and I are here; how could he *not* be saved?!" Nie Dan answered.

"Nie-da-ge, you're not a scholar or a court official, you don't understand all these calculations!" You Miao pleaded. "I can persuade Zhao Chao to keep Zhao Zhuo's life and give him a prince title, but are you certain you can persuade Zhao Zhuo to do the same?"

Nie Dan loomed over You Miao. "At the very least, let me ask you: has your teacher ever taught you what a subject should do when a ruler wishes for him to die? From the very start, His Highness's status was as a subject..."

You Miao replied frostily, "My teacher has taught me that the people come first, society second. The ruler is the least important!"

"The ruler is the least important?!" Nie Dan's voice turned threatening. "*For what* do you think the millions of soldiers sacrificed themselves at the frontlines? For *His Highness*?! Do you think that he alone could persuade the warriors to give up their lives to fight for revenge in the north?!"

You Miao rebuked, "But did you never consider that he's exhausted himself working for Tianqi?! Enthroning him when you needed an emperor, then dethroning him the moment Zhao Zhuo returns...! Do you know that the Jiangnan gentry already loathe him?! And why? Because of the reform! And what is the purpose of the reform? To reclaim the Central Plains! There is no way he will give up the throne—he's done so much, and it's what he deserves! Otherwise, it's too unfair to him!"

Nie Dan practically yelled back, "Are you speaking for *yourself* or *for this country*?! Unfair?! And how has the imperial court ever been *fair* to the soldiers?! You let so many men from the Yang Prefectural Army bleed and fight to death at the frontlines, and now you want me to tell them that what they died for is a mere joke?!"

You Miao was panting.

Nie Dan sneered. "Yes, da-ge knows—you think his loyalty is blind. It's just an emperor; does it really matter who's in that seat? Why does it have to be that one in the north? But your teacher, the Jiangnan gentry, the Imperial College students who fervently sacrificed themselves back when the capital fell, the great literati of Hanlin Academy, the officials who died heroically after being captured in the north—have you ever thought about what *they're* fighting for?"

Nie Dan rose, so angry he was shaking. "You think your teacher's loyalty is also blind, don't you? Let da-ge explain it to you today: there are no two suns in the sky, and the people do not have two rulers. That very loyalty is why there are millions of good men who dauntlessly advance, wave after wave, to fight the Tartars. It doesn't matter if the one in the north is a wise ruler or an asinine one—as long as he carries the name, he must be enthroned! Without the title, one is illegitimate, and illegitimacy cannot lead to success. A man needs to uphold the tenets of righteousness; the kingly way is a banner, and although those who carry this banner might not succeed, those who don't never will! Without the tenets, you will find that *His Highness* doesn't even have the right to raise the royal banner. No one will give up their lives for him—never mind lay their lives down for a just cause and sacrifice themselves for righteousness!"

You Miao was trembling from Nie Dan's yelling; he didn't have the words to counter. He'd always been eloquent and articulate, but now he was actually scared of Nie Dan—not because of Nie Dan's power or position, but because every word he said shot right through You Miao's own thoughts.

Shakily, You Miao said, "But I don't think Zhao Zhuo—"

As though he had seen through him, Nie Dan said frigidly, "Because you rely on His Highness, you're only afraid that you won't keep your position once the court changes blood."

"...That's not true! I just don't think Zhao Zhuo will make a good emperor!" You Miao exclaimed in anger.

"Why do you say that?" Nie Dan questioned coldly. "Do you think the Grand Emperor was blind? Why didn't he pick His Highness as his successor? Zhao Zhuo has benevolence in his heart and is capable of becoming the world's ruler. But what about His Highness? The Heaven, the Earth, the Ruler, the Family, the Teacher—do you think someone who doesn't even want his father and brother knows how to treat the people with kindness? And treating the officials with kindness? I know he's ambitious —"

"You know he's ambitious, but still you entrusted him with the government?!" You Miao rebuked.

Nie Dan roared, "Before the people, before the nation, which is more important—his ambition, or what is right?! I was the one who misjudged him!"

"Zhao Zhuo isn't any better!" You Miao exclaimed. "Someone who'd kneel in shame before the Tartars will not be a good emperor."

Nie Dan sighed. "Si-di, you're twisting words and forcing logic. That was nothing more than enduring humiliation for a great cause. Suicide can save one's integrity for the moment and end things simply, but survival is true heroism; survival for the sake of the country and the people's well-being. Dragging out an ignoble existence is a great benevolence, a great courage! But the price he's paid for his suffering in the north is being trampled by you...you *scum*..."

Nie Dan shook his head, disappointed to the extreme, and turned to leave the Administration Chamber. You Miao was at a loss for what to say, and felt utterly defeated by Nie Dan. However, even if every single world Nie Dan had said was true, he still refused to change his will.

Just as Nie Dan was about to exit the inner yard, You Miao suddenly said, “You’re right. I understand the logic, da-ge.”

He sighed and said, “I won’t listen to you. Not for anything else, but purely because Zhao Chao has treated me genuinely and with sincerity. He’s an earnest person. The position of emperor did not come easily for him, which is why he cherishes it all the more. He’s always walked on thin ice in fear and trepidation, afraid to take a single wrong step. True, he has an unyielding personality, but as long as he’s given the time to consider, he still knows how to accept his wrongs, and to change. I believe he can do better than Zhao Zhuo. If Zhao Zhuo returns, he will definitely draw the Jiangnan gentry to his side and bond with the major clans. As Mencius says, ‘*Those in government must not offend the great families.*’ But as an emperor, Zhao Chao is close to the *people*. He understands their suffering. He’s also commanded the army before; he knows to treat the soldiers with benevolence.

“You think that because I’ve a high position that if Zhao Zhuo returns, I will lose my footing? You’re completely wrong. I *wish* he’d come back; that way, Li Zhifeng and I can drop everything and go live our happily ever after. Do you seriously think I enjoy all the court disputes and complicated political matters? Isn’t it all for the fact that when we first swore to be brothers, you implored us to work for the country and for the people?

“I want to withdraw, but I can’t; I know that better than any of you. I don’t want to do this job. If I could, I’d retire—but there’s no one who can do this better than me, so I don’t. This is the truth, and I mean it. I admit that I am not anyone uncorrupt. But throughout the years, the money I’ve taken, the money I’ve spent, the benefits I’ve reaped from manipulating power, the advantages I’ve gained from beating my political opponents—all of it was used in the right places.

“I believe I did not take a single wrong step. My conscience is clear before the people of Tianqi. That is all I have to say on this subject, no more. To each their own.”

This speech was obviously a tit for tat, wherein You Miao admitted that he and Nie Dan stood on different grounds. No matter who was right or who was wrong, he would not turn back. He would continue onward.

Nie Dan didn’t respond and left the Administration Chamber.

[Chapter 53]

You Miao had been standing in the yard for a while when a thought struck him, and he immediately called Mu Feng over. “Follow General Nie. See where he’s going. If he makes any alarming moves, report back to me at once.”

After Mu Feng left with those orders, You Miao finally prepared to return to his own room. Quietly, he cast a glance at Sun Yu’s door, feeling millions of emotions welling in his chest.

You Miao was worried that Nie Dan was going to make night calls at each of the civil official’s homes. If he made his intentions clear, something irreparable might happen to Tianqi’s court. And should Zhao Chao find out about it the next day, the situation would escalate to something unsalvageable. This was why You Miao had someone keep an eye on Nie Dan, so that any unusual movements could be immediately intercepted.

Their talks had fallen apart, there was no better way to go about it at this point. However, at ergeng time, Mu Feng reported that Nie Dan was at the Ministry of War.

You Miao could feel his head throbbing nonstop. “What’s he doing at the Ministry of War at this hour?”

“Prompting for reparations for the deceased soldiers and asking for his past two years’ salary,” Mu Feng answered.

Only then did You Miao realize that Nie Dan didn’t have any place to live in either Maocheng or Yang Prefectural City, and not once had he ever stayed in Maocheng. Whenever he returned, he stayed either at the barracks or at the Ministry of War. Except now, since Li Zhifeng had set out on the expedition, the Yang Prefectural Army camp had been transformed into a garrison site. Zhao Chao and Nie Dan had a huge fight earlier that day, and who knows what orders had been given to chase him out of the palace. He had no place to settle. Evidently, he had thought he might be able to stay at the Administration Chamber, but unfortunately, he and You Miao got into an argument.

You Miao quickly mounted a horse. Snow was flurrying again. As he’d never removed his gear since his return that morning, Nie Dan stood fully-armored in the inner yard of the Ministry of War against the dim yellow light emanating from inside the office. His tall, upstanding form basked in

the lantern glow, exuding a particular sense of solitude amidst the drifting snow.

Year after year, from Gold River to Jade Pass;
Day after day, wielding horse whips and war blades.
Late spring white snow to Green Grave fly,
Ten thousand miles Yellow River 'round Mount Black rush.[15]

For a God of War who protected all of Tianqi—what exactly was it that supported him and kept him fighting? You Miao couldn't figure it out sometimes.

As You Miao walked into the yard, Nie Dan turned his head, his brows deeply locked.

"The Ministry of War is out of funds, too," You Miao said. "Da-ge, come with me..."

With easy familiarity, You Miao ordered the office to open up the side hall and lit the lamps inside. The firelight warmed the air.

"Can you lend me some money?" Nie Dan said. "Da-ge didn't bring any cash on him."

You Miao answered with a "mn" and called over the Ministry of War's administrator. He arranged reparations for the bereaved, then wrote a note for Mu Feng to collect Nie Dan's salary from the vault the next day.

"Da-ge, you don't have anywhere to stay in the city. Let me find you a place," he said.

Nie Dan followed You Miao out. "It doesn't have to be anywhere expensive. My salary will be supplementing the reparations' deficit; I can't afford to spend right now, so nothing extravagant."

You Miao smiled. "Relax, it's my own place."

"Excellent, then." Nie Dan nodded.

The two didn't mention the big fight they'd had earlier at the Administration Chamber, and they didn't talk about the warfront either.

At first, You Miao thought Nie Dan was someone who wouldn't turn a blind eye and; that when he left the Administration Chamber, it might have meant they had broken all ties. But then again, maybe what You Miao had said at the end made him realize something—though they could not accept each other's actions, they could mutually understand where the other was coming from.

Nie Dan and You Miao dismounted in front of Moyan Pavilion.

"Let's leave the state's feuds for now. Da-ge, I've often missed you..."

You Miao's voice choked up, and with red rimmed eyes, he went and hugged Nie Dan. Nie Dan let out a long sigh and patted his back.

You Miao was being sincere. In these past years, Nie Dan's honorable and principled conduct was like a mountain supporting his back. You Miao dominated the court; once he determined his position on any major or minor issues—be they military, economic, reforms, or quelling insurgencies—he would not concede a single step. And most of that confidence and self-control was drawn from Nie Dan.

The imperial court might be wary of Sun Yu, of Zhao Chao—but the one they were most wary of was Nie Dan. The authority of the ruler, experience, partisanship...all of that was fluff. The real power lay in the army of millions, the one defending them against the one hundred thousand Barbarians—and that army rested in Nie Dan's hands. Therefore, if Nie Dan supported Zhao Chao, no one at court would dare touch the emperor. However, should this support be withdrawn, a few simple words would not be able to reconcile the grudges built between the new government and the gentry in recent years. That was why You Miao had to do everything in his power to prevent it from coming to pass.

"Your family's business is indeed impressive. This is why they call the You family the number one clan of Jiangnan," Nie Dan said, flashing a rare smile.

When the boy servants saw their young master had come, they turned out in full force to welcome him and his guest. As he led Nie Dan inside, You Miao said, "Far from it. My dad might have built it up from nothing, but he'd be considered nouveau riche at most had it not been for the You and Qiao families' long generational lines. The Jiangnan clans like the Tangs and Xies look down on new money."

Nie Dan nodded, not commenting on the pavilion's interior style. Although Moyan Pavilion wasn't open for business yet, everything in the courtyard was arranged in its proper place—every blade of grass and branch on the trees, all the rockeries and streams. Such a nest of tranquility was difficult to create amidst the noise of the bustling city; it was a small world of its own. You Miao brought Nie Dan to a room next to the river. It was very quiet inside; the only sound was the gentle lapping of the wind on river water, the surface of which reflected the crescent moon hanging in the sky.

Qiao Rong emerged from the corridors, eyes still groggy with sleep. "It's so late, why have you come here?"

But then the sight of a tall, large stranger next to You Miao startled her a little.

You Miao quickly introduced them. “This is my cousin. Biaojie, this is my oldest sworn brother.”

Understanding, Qiao Rong said, “I will have food arranged at once.”

Nei Dan nodded, composed. “Please excuse my intrusion.”

Qiao Rong chuckled. “This is You Miao’s place; I’m only helping keep things in order. Da-ge, please make yourself at home. You two brothers can have some little refreshments first, I’ll go check on the kitchen.”

You Miao nodded, and Qiao Rong gave Nie Dan a small curtsy before excusing herself.

Nie Dan still looked somewhat distracted when You Miao beckoned him inside. Knowing Nie Dan wasn’t used to being waited on, he sent all the maids away and only kept Mu Feng, instructing him to obey Nie Dan while he lived at the pavilion.

“Mu Feng has followed me since I first returned to Jiangnan,” You Miao said. “I’ll lend him to you to use, da-ge.”

Nie Dan quickly declined. “There’s no need.”

But You Miao raised a hand to gesture that there was indeed a need—as Nie Dan was by himself, he would run into many inconveniences. You Miao turned to Mu Feng.

“There’s no need to report to me whatever General Nie orders you to do. Here, he has the final say.”

Mu Feng gave a curt nod, having received the order.

Nie Dan smiled. “No matter what happens, we are still brothers. Your da-ge won’t be suspicious of you.”

“Mn.”

Nie Dan removed his armor in front of the mirror, revealing muscles lined with crisscrossing scars, and You Miao helped him change into a long robe. After that, the two sat at the table and sipped on tea. Before You Miao had to ask, Qiao Rong had already left a series of instructions outside—first to heat some water, then to have Nie Dan bathe.

The windows to the inner room that faced the river were left open for fresh air, and the brazier kept the interior nice and toasty. After washing up, Nie Dan came out to a table of small dishes with a pot of heated liquor—all of which were winter delicacies local to Yang Prefecture.

You Miao poured Nie Dan a drink and said, smiling, “Since you’re back, take a few days to rest.”

At last, Nie Dan nodded. “One step at a time. But the matter with the reparations will still need your attention.”

“Mn. I know,” You Miao replied.

Raising his chopsticks, Nie Dan took a bite and suddenly fell silent. This made You Miao nervous; he was a little scared of him now, and he was worried Nie Dan was going to say something along the lines of, “*The vermillion doors reek of wine and meat, while the bones of the frozen dead lie by the roadside,*”[16] that the warfront had to eat bark and grass roots while Jiangnan heedlessly partied every day and night...

“Is the food not to your liking, da-ge?” You Miao asked.

“No, it just tastes very similar to what your da-sao used to make when she was alive,” Nie Dan replied.

Seeing that it was a plate of stir-fried shrimp with tulip petals, You Miao relaxed. This was a common Jiangnan dish, and Moyan Pavilion’s chef had to have put heart into making it.

Wanting the same chef to make more of the dish, he turned to Mu Feng. “Go ask who made this.”

However, Qiao Rong entered with a big smile on her face moments later. “How is the food? The pavilion isn’t open for business yet, and the chefs aren’t from around here so they clocked out a long time ago. I made the dishes myself.”

You Miao was a little surprised, but also inwardly pleased by the fact. Qiao Rong was indeed an exceptional woman who was perfect in every way.

Nie Dan cupped his hands at her in courtesy. “Thank you, miss. It makes me ill at ease to have caused all this trouble.”

“Miao-zi’s gege is one of us. Eat more if you like it,” Qiao Rong replied, and approached the table to pour more drink for the men.

An idea struck You Miao, and thinking that it was time for Nie Dan to rest and relax, he said to Qiao Rong, “Biaojie, why don’t you join us for a cup or two?”

When Qiao Rong answered positively, Nie Dan quickly moved to give room for her to sit and You Miao instructed the servants to set the table.

“I quite like the Champion Red from Riverwave Estate, but its after-effects are strong; I don’t dare drink it too much,” Qiao Rong said.

Nei Dan had fought in the army for his entire life and had been a widower for fifteen years. After his wife and child died, matchmakers crowded his door in hopes of setting him up with a second marriage. However, Nie Dan never met with any other woman, and he used his frequent expeditions as the reason to decline meeting.

Qiao Rong was a well-mannered girl from a good family. She asked a bit about the army during the conversation, which led Nie Dan to divulge much about how to arrange formations, how to mobilize troops, and the landscapes and cultures beyond the Wall. Qiao Rong listened to him with a smile, very curious about it all.

As he sipped his liquor, You Miao thought, *Qiao Rong is getting old, and is still single. It'd be a happy occasion if the two of them are willing to make a match.* With that in mind, his eyes flitted between the two, peering left and glancing right—and Qiao Rong guessed his intent. After they'd had their fill of food and drink, she got the servants to clear up before she excused herself.

"Is Miao-zi sleeping at home tonight?"

You Miao had the very intention. "It's too late to head back to the office, I'll stay here."

"Don't trouble anyone to clean out a room for you, then," Nie Dan said. "We can sleep on the same bed."

Since Nie Dan had spoken, You Miao nodded happily. With a body warmed by drink, he squished with Nie Dan in his bed. It was still very bright outside because of the flurrying snow, and the light of night shone through the windowpanes.

"Da-ge," You Miao called softly.

Eyes still closed, Nie Dan grunted in acknowledgment, obviously awake. A long while after, he sighed. "It's been many years since I've slept on a bed at home."

"You've been fighting for Tianqi for all these years. What is it that keeps you going?" You Miao asked.

Nie Dan didn't answer. And after a long, long time, after You Miao was drowsy, he replied, "I promised Yun-er that no matter what, we'd have a home..."

Bleary, You Miao mumbled, "Mn. Be that as it may..."

Nie Dan recited, "*When the royal north-bound army reclaims the Central Plains*...[17]"

But You Miao didn't hear any more of what Nie Dan said as he fell asleep.

He was shaken awake the next morning, and the one who roused him was surprisingly Xie Quan.

"Get up now!" Xie Quan exclaimed. "Lord You, wake up! Something big's happened!"

Startled awake, You Miao sat up. "Why are you here?"

"We've all been searching for you!" Xie Quan cried, exasperated. "There's a huge crowd outside the Administration Chamber! I heard you left with your servant and didn't stay there last night, so I thought you might be here at Moyan Pavilion."

"Did something happen to my teacher?" You Miao was instantly alarmed.

"Mister Sun is fine. General Nie, on the other hand, went to the morning assembly today!"

You could feel a splitting headache coming on. He had done his best to persuade the man, but in the end, Nie Dan still attended court. It was easy to guess what had happened. Xie Quan waited for You Miao to wash up, and You Miao quickly went through the motions of wiping his face. He didn't even bother with breakfast before he left with Xie Quan.

The carriage didn't stop at the Administration Chamber. Instead, it took them to the back entrance of the Ministry of War. When You Miao went in, the room was filled with people. Ping Xi, Lin Luoyang, Qin Shaonan...the same gang from the former capital. And now, there was Xie Quan, too.

As soon as You Miao walked in, Ping Xi said, "Nie Dan went to the morning assembly and submitted a memorial. And we've gone insane because of it."

"Enough of your nonsense. Got anything to eat? Breakfast first," You Miao said.

Clouds of gloom choked the room, but that reaction was all the worried sick got from You Miao after they'd waited for so long. The crowd slumped.

Ping Xi got plain congee served, which You Miao inhaled. As he ate, everyone watched him with bated breath. Tea was served afterward, but You Miao remained deeply silent as he held the cup. All of a sudden, he noticed something odd. As he swept a look around the room, he saw a look in everyone's eyes that he'd never seen before.

Indeed... You Miao had become, more or less, the leader of the group. There was no longer anyone who dared reproach him. On the contrary, they had to listen to his orders and obey plans. Sun Yu's serious condition meant You Miao was the next Political Advisor; at the age of twenty-two, he would soon reach the highest position of any official. He would become superior to all, save only one man, and would influence the very foundation of their government.

"His Majesty already knew of his intentions since yesterday afternoon," You Miao said. "The argument inside the imperial study was about this issue. Don't tell me that none of you have eyes in the palace?"

You Miao scanned the room and could tell that the group had understood.

"What was the resolution today?" he asked.

"General Nie vehemently remonstrated. His Majesty was furious. He wasn't punished, though, and was only made to wait at the capital. Warfront matters have been handed to Li Zhifeng," Ping Xi said.

Qin Shaonan interrupted, "I heard Li Yan say that you were there as well on yesterday afternoon?"

"I was," You Miao said. "This issue can't be resolved with speed; it has to be delayed. Let me explain it this way: there are no two suns in the sky, and the people do not have two rulers. I do not approve of dethronement, at least not for now... Weird." You Miao suddenly noticed something odd, and asked, "Where's Li Yan?"

Ping Xi shook his head, and You Miao asked, "He didn't come? Did you tell him about this meeting?"

"He was kept by His Majesty after the morning assembly. I saw it myself when I left court. His Majesty summoned him," Xie Quan answered.

"Forget Li Yan," Qin Shaonan said angrily. "The Xie, Tang, and Lin families are all in favor of the peace talks, implying they agree with dethronement. How could His Majesty possibly sit still when this is right in his face? General Nie had the majority support at court this morning; nearly half of the officials joined his side. No one who wasn't in favor of the peace talks dared to say a word. Everyone's comments were laced with implications, and when they saw General Nie had changed the direction of the wind, they all moved to help push the wall down. Anyone who opposed the majority opinion was a disloyal and unfilial fiend, one who denounced the laws and opposed the heavens..."

“The peace talks *must* happen, there’s no other way,” Lin Luoyang commented. “The present Jiangnan region must stabilize and focus on local livelihoods. The people’s foundation has been severely affected by a year of war. The best plan right now is to welcome back the two emperors, and split the north and south with the Tartars and the Barbarians. And if possible, temporarily section off the north of the Yellow River to them—”

“That won’t work,” Ping Xi said. “Peace negotiations mean the return of the hostages, which means dethronement. You can’t keep Li Zhifeng at the frontlines holding the enemies back without a peep; it doesn’t make sense for him to stay stationed there without attempting negotiations or opening fire. Besides, even if we don’t say anything, that doesn’t mean the Tartars will let us have our way. As soon as they send an escort with the hostages to the south with a demand for peace, we will fall into a defensive situation.”

They went around in circles and returned to the same problem.

“The Jiangnan gentry agrees with Nie Dan because they aren’t able to gain any benefits from His Majesty,” You Miao stated.

This was a problem that everyone present was well aware of—last year’s reform had offended the major prominent clans, and now almost all of them believed that the gentry’s power and influence would be further weakened if Zhao Chao stayed emperor. No one was willing to support him, and they couldn’t wait for him to get the hell off the throne. They were wary of both Nie Dan and Sun Yu at first, but Sun Yu had fallen gravely ill and Nie Dan was prompting for the return of the two emperors. Although Zhao Chao was the Son of Heaven who presided over all, in the end, he still had to face the risk of enthronement and dethronement at the drop of a hat.

“Either way, I won’t... I won’t... I won’t...”

You Miao was having a hard time finding the right wording. In this situation, nothing he could say felt right. He could not let the others know of the plan he’d conceived for Zhao Chao.

“When the time comes, I will go to the peace talks myself,” You Miao expressed his intent, and said to the group, “I will think of a way to resolve this problem. As for everything else, you guys can handle it as you see fit.”

“How are you going to resol—” Ping Xi stopped himself abruptly, and everyone fell silent.

Xie Quan nodded. “I’m sure there are ways; let’s not worry anymore.”

“Do *you* have any ideas?” You Miao asked back.

Xie Quan didn't answer. You Miao scoffed, but his eyes were full of warning: *If you know anything, keep it to yourself. I don't care if you overheard it or if you figured it out yourself; you will not speak of this again.*

Xie Quan was an intelligent man, and indeed didn't speak again.

You Miao added, "Everyone here knows we've got it good with His Majesty; we won't be treated the same with anyone else in charge."

The good he spoke of referred to both social favors and individual interests. Of the group present, You Miao was to become the next Political Advisor, and three of the remaining four were already chief ministers. Furthermore, Li Yan, currently absent, was a great scholar of the Hanlin Academy. Even if Zhao Zhuo returned to the throne, they would not be able to climb to higher positions.

Zhao Chao had already personally given them the maximum power possible. Only Li Yan, who had once been Zhao Zhuo's trusted aide, could really truly *suppose* that he might attain a better career with the former emperor's return. But You Miao believed that Zhao Chao wouldn't keep Li Yan in the Hanlin Academy forever, and it wouldn't be long before he would utilize him heavily. The only reason keeping Zhao Chao from doing so already was because Li Yan used to be in the Crown Prince's faction, and had suppressed Zhao Chao in the past. Having thought this, You Miao glanced at Ping Xi.

Ping Xi said, "We escaped together, after all—we and His Majesty. We never forgot, or else we wouldn't have called you to this meeting."

You Miao nodded and didn't respond.

The Jiangnan gentry wanted to obtain more benefits, which was why they supported the negotiation talks; You Miao knew this. They had all picked their camps, and Zhao Chao had stripped Nie Dan of military power. Whatever happened next would be the consequences of their decisions.

And You Miao still had one last support—Li Zhifeng.

Nie Dan wouldn't be dispatched again, and Zhao Chao wouldn't send Tang Hui; for the man was blind. That meant warfront movement was under You Miao's control. If You Miao told Li Zhifeng to retreat, he would retreat; if You Miao told Li Zhifeng to fight, he would fight. Li Zhifeng was the most critical chess piece in manipulating the situation.

As long as Li Zhifeng commanded the warfront, it wouldn't matter who the imperial court named the emissary for the meeting with the Tartars. As

long as Zhao Chao could make his arrangements and ignore everyone's hidden intent to dethrone him, then You Miao would be on the other end suppressing all inside information of the peace talks.

The real battle would begin once the two former emperors were returned. Everything had to be calculated perfectly—there could be no schemes unanticipated, and Zhao Chao's mouth had to be gagged at all cost. No matter what he thought about the matter, he could not be allowed to kill Zhao Zhuo. They would need to protect Zhao Zhuo's life and send him away to be a prince, and then assist Li Zhifeng in reclaiming the old capital —once all that was accomplished, all of You Miao's burdens in life would be taken care of. He could resign, go home, and live out his humble days.

In light of all the blood and sweat he'd shed, You Miao prayed that the heavens wouldn't give him too many problems.

* * *

When You Miao returned to the Administration Chamber that afternoon, the mood in the hall was strange—it was as if everyone was aware of certain information, but weren't willing to talk about it. You Miao also didn't talk, only sitting down to process the memorials in his pile. By evening, everyone stopped what they were doing at the same time as if they had planned it.

Tang Hui started to speak first. "Lord You."

"Mn." You Miao knew what Tang Hui wanted to say, but didn't want to bother with that matter.

Tang Bo wouldn't let You Miao off the hook, however. He asked, "What does my lord think of the issue that came up in today's morning assembly?"

The supervisory secretaries' eyes all turned to You Miao.

Putting his memorials away, You Miao answered with a sigh, "I didn't attend the morning assembly, so I don't know what transpired."

He had blocked Tang Bo cleanly and completely with just once sentence, but Tang Bo still wouldn't let him go. He said seriously, "Lord You does jest. This matter is closely linked to the Son of Heaven, the people, and the government. How can the Administration Chamber remove itself from it? There is no reason to sit back and watch."

You Miao knew he hadn't won Tang Bo over yet. And not just Tang Bo, but all of the supervisory secretaries. As things stood, he had to give them a

clear answer.

"Since ancient times, the Son of Heaven submits to the Heavens above and fosters the people below," Tang Bo said. "Lord You, you must not insist on acting willfully regarding this matter."

You Miao stared at Tang Bo and repeated, "Acting willfully?"

The supervisory secretaries were silent; every pair of eyes were fixed on Tang Bo and You Miao. You Miao scanned the room and came to understand that this was the attitude the Administration Chamber had agreed on.

"I see. But Lord Tang, pray that you also remember what you've said today," You Miao said.

Tang Bo creased his brows. You Miao's words were threatening and layered, warning everyone to watch themselves—if they could not overthrow Zhao Chao, You Miao would remember everything that had transpired today.

Originally, Tang Bo had prepared a long speech to probe You Miao, but You Miao seemed to be hinting that there was more to come, that he shouldn't be too happy too soon. After swallowing his planned words, Tang Bo couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Let us wait," You Miao said impassively. "Time will naturally give everyone an explanation. The Administration Chamber was established in the previous dynasty; it presides over the six ministries, and can even decline and return the Son of Heaven's edicts. But even though it has managed state affairs for two hundred and twenty-five years, this matter involves the imperial family. I advise everyone not to speak tactlessly or act carelessly."

You Miao fixed his robes and rose to his feet. He walked to the main hall's entrance and stopped, turning to Tang Bo.

"Has Lord Tang ever wondered why the Administration Chamber has been able to maintain its superior status for so long? It is because everyone here focuses on serving the country—whether they be gentry or from humble origins. It will never be wrong to serve the country. Whoever actively gets sucked into this conflict will cost the Administration Chamber its neutral position; one it has always held. If Mister Sun was in good health, he would never intervene in this matter."

A sensible and reasonable response. There was nothing the supervisory secretaries could counter You Miao with. Tang Bo had deliberated his

speech for a long time, but he hadn't anticipated You Miao's would be the one to subdue everyone. He had to nod in agreement.

"Lord You is absolutely right. We are the ones who have been thoughtless."

You Miao flashed a light smile and cupped his hands at them in salute before he left in a whirl of sleeves.

However, that night, Xie Hui personally came to see him. He brought with him the major clans' declaration of their position, and hinted to You Miao that he needed to stand firm now. You Miao could admonish the supervisory secretaries all he wanted, but he had to be polite to his elder Xie Hui. Their conversation only heightened You Miao's worries.

From what Xie Hui was telling him, the Jiangnan gentry wanted to draw You Miao to their side and make him stop protecting Zhao Chao. You Miao didn't give a straight answer, and after courteously sending Xie Hui away, he returned to his room and heaved a long sigh.

Nie Dan demanded the peace negotiations and wanted Zhao Chao to abdicate. The Jiangnan gentry wanted to dethrone Zhao Chao, and no one in the Administration Chamber supported him...

Hang on. You Miao was suddenly alert. If that was the case, how many supporters did Zhao Chao have?

Ping Xi and the others had made their decisions based on You Miao's opinion, but maybe they had only sought to find out *his* stance. Everyone was making wagers, and whether they placed their bets on Zhao Chao or Zhao Zhuo didn't have much to do with You Miao's decision. And the truth was, if they had to be real about it, those guys were still biased toward Zhao Zhuo. After all, they used to be in the Crown Prince's faction back at the old capital alongside Li Yan.

Which meant the only one who supported Zhao Chao was You Miao himself.

If the gentry won over You Miao and Li Zhifeng, then Zhao Chao's game would be as good as lost... At this moment, You Miao finally sensed the danger. The situation was not looking optimistic for Zhao Chao in the least. If the factions who supported him weren't properly sorted when Zhao Zhuo returned, a bloody storm would no doubt await them...

You Miao paced in his room, deep in thought, when he suddenly recalled another thing. A man who was crucial to the situation's development.

Immediately, You Miao rushed out the door and into the night. He instructed for a carriage to be prepared, then hurried to the Imperial Army's government office.

Inside, Tang Hui was cleaning his longsword. He was someone who stayed out of political affairs, neither attending court nor participating in any political decision-making. In spite of this, he presently held control over the most important military force—the Imperial Army. Nie Dan had been stripped of his military authority, so now, the only grand commanders who had the power to control the Tianqi army were Li Zhifeng and Tang Hui.

Tang Hui sensed it was him from his footsteps. "You Miao?"

You Miao sat across from him at the table, and asked, "Tang-da-ge, has anyone come to seek you in the past few days?"

"About the matter with His Majesty?" Tang Hui asked coolly.

Startled, You Miao's expression grew grim. "Yes."

"Lord Tang from the Ministry of Public Works sent some things over. They're all packed away in the chest in the corner," Tang Hui answered.

You Miao let out a sigh, knowing now that there were others trying to pull Tang Hui to their side.

Putting away his sword, Tang Hui said, "I will have to return those things sooner or later. You've been busy recently, haven't you?"

"Mn." You Miao knew that he didn't have to dance around when talking to people like Tang Hui, so he simply asked, "Tang-da-ge, what did you think of Zhao Zhuo when you worked at the old capital?"

Tang Hui was silent. You Miao didn't rush him, and only waited as the water clock dripped and the night light dimmed.

A long while after, Tang Hui answered, "Back then, His Highness treated me very well."

You Miao was a little lost in thought; his ears heard him, but his brain wasn't turning. "Mn."

"But," Tang Hui added, "His Highness the Third Prince treated me better. You know me; had I been more astute to the workings of the court, I wouldn't have been transferred out of the capital to Yang Prefecture, and for seven years at that."

You Miao asked in a low voice, "Between him and Zhao Zhuo, who do you think is better suited to be emperor?"

Tang Hui froze, and You Miao added, “Tang-da-ge, you and I aren’t usually together in one place. But oftentimes, we are actually much closer than those court officials.”

“Yes.” Tang Hui chuckled. “I knew you were a good person even back when you were the Army Supervisor for the Capital Army. You and the other lord officials are different, and it’s thanks to you that this gege of yours has what he has today.”

You Miao sighed. Tang Hui remembered old affections, and knew it was thanks to You Miao’s recommendation letter in the days of the old capital that he’d landed what he had today. But You Miao always felt that his actions had instead been an ill wind; one that had done no one any good. Had he not recommended Tang Hui, he wouldn’t have had to carry such a heavy burden now. In retrospect, if Tang Hui had remained in Yang Prefecture for all this time, he wouldn’t have lost his eyes and fallen so low.

Whenever he thought about it seriously, You Miao felt he owed Tang Hui.

With no idea of what was on You Miao’s mind, Tang Hui said, “I’ve also heard what’s happening at court.”

You Miao gave an “mn,” anticipating Tang Hui’s response, which came swiftly this time.

“Zhao Zhuo is a wise ruler, that is without a doubt.”

It clicked for You Miao, and he finally understood.

Back at the old capital, You Miao rarely came in contact with Zhao Zhuo and thus didn’t have much of an opinion on him. His only impression was that Zhao Zhuo was modest and gentlemanly. But since the migration to Jiangnan, everyone kept their mouths shut about him—probably because they didn’t dare to mention him. However, both Nie Dan and Tang Hui believed that Zhao Zhuo was a wise ruler. Zhao Chao had worked so closely with the military for so many years that You Miao assumed those two would support him...but he was completely mistaken.

It was true, now that You Miao thought about it. Tang Hui had commanded the Imperial Army since before the fall. Why would Zhao Zhuo entrust him with the Imperial Army if he wasn’t loyal?

You Miao watched Tang Hui. Tang Hui was blinded and could not observe You Miao’s face, but he could sense worry in his voice.

“But I will still follow Zhao Chao,” Tang Hui added. “No matter what anyone says, no matter what General Nie thinks or how he acts, his

decisions have nothing to do with me."

Quietly, he continued, "I admire General Nie. He protects and defends the homßßeland; a soldier's role model. Loyalty, justice, ceremony, filial piety, integrity—he fulfills these precepts and knows when to advance and when to back down. I cannot say the same for myself."

You Miao sighed in relief. All the questions he had thrown at Tang Hui had aimed to elicit that last statement. He had to know who the grand commander supported, he who held the Imperial Army in hand. With that answer, You Miao knew that Zhao Chao would not be forsaken by all.ß

He patted Tang Hui's shoulder. "Thank you, Tang-da-ge."

"You're welcome," Tang Hui replied coolly, and returned to wiping his sword.

Not fussing with formalities, You Miao stood up and bid his farewell.

Tang Hui willingly telling You Miao where he stood on this matter meant that he'd entrusted him with his life. This was otherwise information one should never divulge to anyone, ever. Supporting Nie Dan meant offending Zhao Chao, but supporting Zhao Chao would garner one a name for disloyalty. Truly, a dilemma.

That night, You Miao wrote Li Zhifeng a long, voluminous letter detailing the situation at Maocheng. He added at the end of it, "*Don't know when we shall meet again.*" He missed him so much it was making him miserable.

He finally put down the brush when it was nearly the time for roosters to crow, feeling exhausted both mentally and physically. Miswritten words littered his letter, which was choked full of negative, gloomy sentiment. He rarely felt this way, and the personal letters he sent Li Zhifeng reported primarily happy news, not bad. After mulling for a minute over whether he should rip it up, he let it go in the end; he really didn't have the energy to compose a new one. Thus, he instructed a boy servant to take the letter back to Riverwave to have Cheng Guangwu—who was the most skilled in martial arts—deliver it to the frontlines.

Another day passed. When the news of Zhao Chao stripping Nie Dan's military power spread, the civil officials turned to each other for information. When they at last learned that Nie Dan was staying in Maocheng—and at the You family's restaurant, no less—the more sensitive of the bunch immediately arrived at a certain conclusion. Some speculated that it was You Miao who retained Nie Dan; Nie Dan had no one else at

court to rely on, and the only one who could act in spite of Zhao Chao's fury was You Miao. On these grounds, perhaps You Miao and Nie Dan had come to an agreement and singled out Zhao Chao. Others had speculated that things weren't what they appeared, and no one had a clue what You Miao was playing at.

In the following days, the Administration Chamber was practically flattened by the number of officials coming to call, dying to learn what You Miao's thoughts were on Nie Dan's appeal and to attempt to win him to their side. After all, when Sun Yu inevitably passed away, You Miao would be conferred the power of managing the entire Administration Chamber.

You Miao didn't have time for social engagements, though; lately, he was at the lowest he'd ever been in his life. He had been separated from Li Zhifeng for almost a year, Nie Dan and Zhao Chao had turned on each other, Sun Yu lay in bed paralyzed by a stroke, the political affairs at the Administration Chamber were piled as high as mountains... Everything. Everything was sucking him dry.

And the strangest thing was that Zhao Chao had stopped summoning You Miao. For days, Zhao Chao had avoided the topic of peace talks during the morning assembly, and he hadn't called You Miao to the imperial study. You Miao had the mind to request an audience and talk to Zhao Chao about the matter, but decided against it, figuring Zhao Chao might have his own plans.

Days later, as You Miao was leaving the morning assembly after dismissal, he ran into Li Yan on his way to the imperial study. Li Yan nodded and You Miao returned the greeting, and the two thus brushed past each other.

You Miao was thinking about the Ministry of Revenue's spring crop seed distribution. This was the new government's second year, and when the Yang Prefectural Army returned to work the fields, they would need to be reassigned their own allotted land to avoid conflict with the tenant farmers... But just as Li Yan passed him, You Miao sharply sensed something.

"Wait," You Miao said.

Li Yan stopped in his tracks and turned around. "What?"

"You're going to the imperial study?" You Miao asked.

After a brief hesitation, Li Yan nodded.

“The memorial from the Ministry of Revenue has been sitting in the imperial study for three days. Can you prompt His Majesty for me? We’re waiting for his approval,” You Miao said.

Li Yan made an affirmative “mn,” and replied, “He probably forgot. How’s this: if he still doesn’t have the time to look at it later, I’ll pull the memorial out and have it sent to you directly.”

You Miao nodded in delight and parted with Li Yan. But as soon as he turned around, his expression spoiled into a grim, deep frown.

What was Zhao Chao so busy with, that he didn’t have the time to look at memorials from the Ministry of Revenue? He had summoned Li Yan, too. He couldn’t be planning to counter Nie Dan, could he?

Presently, Nie Dan held neither power nor influence; nevertheless, it was not entirely impossible that Zhao Chao wanted to press charges and place him under supervision. But should Nie Dan be thrown in jail, the military would immediately mutiny. Besides taking the military into account, Zhao Chao should have also considered their shared kinship, and the fact that You Miao would be at the forefront taking the heat. He shouldn’t have undertaken such an action—even if he really wanted to persecute Nie Dan, he needed a convincing reason.

Although You Miao kept consoling himself that it wouldn’t happen, he was nonetheless worried. After leaving the morning assembly, he went straight to Moyan Pavilion.

It was early spring, and the willow trees planted in Jiangnan had gradually sprouted new buds. Despite the still-cool air, traces of greenery and life had begun to burgeon. When You Miao returned to Moyan Pavilion, Nie Dan was seated inside a wooden parlor near the river playing a zither. Qiao Rong sat beside him, wearing a graceful smile.

Nie Dan had changed into a dark red army robe, while Qiao Rong was dressed in a light muslin robe of oriole red and emerald green. As a spring breeze brushed past, the pair presented an elegant sight. Unconsciously, You Miao paused in his step and watched as they conversed in the veranda.

“Kindred spirits are hard to come by, who will listen when the string snaps?” Nie Dan lamented as he stopped his playing.

Qiao Rong chuckled. “You’re only thirty-two this year. Don’t always act like you’re disillusioned by the mortal world, all right?”

Nie Dan grinned. “Young the man may be, yet his heart is already old.”

Qiao Rong asked, “What do you want to eat today?”

“Don’t go through so much trouble, just something homey will be fine,” Nie Dan said. “I’ve been back for half a month and every day I’ve troubled you all. I feel terrible.”

Chuckling, Qiao Rong replied, “It’s a great blessing to have you here to keep me company. Miao-zi has so much money that he could support the government—I don’t see you caring about that.”

She said this as she stood and walked down the corridor, startling when she bumped into You Miao. You Miao only grinned and made a “shh” gesture, however, and motioned her to be on her way while he tiptoed over to the veranda. Nie Dan was staring blankly at the river with his back facing the corridor. You Miao snuck over, reached out, and covered his eyes with his hands.

Just when You Miao was about to ask “Guess who?” to play the trick of a Jiangnan child, Nie Dan unexpectedly did a backhand hook, not holding back with him at all. You Miao immediately moved to block him, but Nie Dan used his momentum to yank him forward, causing You Miao to fall into his lap and be subsequently caught by his large hand.

“Away!” Nie Dan cried.

Instantly, a powerful force cloaked beneath gentleness pushed against You Miao’s waist, sending him flying, consequently toppling a number of tables in his trajectory before he crashed into a corner.

You Miao groaned. “Da-ge, you...”

Nie Dan found You Miao’s ashen, sorry figure to be absolutely hilarious, and burst out laughing. You Miao viciously grabbed an inkstone to seek his revenge, but Nie Dan stood up, and laughing still, easily blocked his futile attack with a single hand.

“That’s enough play, now. Stop!” Nie Dan chided.

Exasperated, You Miao set the toppled tables straight and then regarded Nie Dan appraisingly with mirth in his eyes.

Nie Dan straightened the zither and returned to his stern composure. “What did His Majesty say?”

“Nothing much,” You Miao replied helplessly. “Can I not come find you even if His Majesty doesn’t say anything?”

“Of course you can,” Nie Dan said. “But you’re a man of many wicked designs. Your da-ge has to be on guard against you.”

“Eating my food, drinking my wine, but you still guard against me. There is no one who has it harder than me in this world,” You Miao

grumbled.

Nie Dan looked at him and burst out laughing again. You Miao smiled it off instead of fussing with him. Deep down, he knew that his da-ge treated him well. As they tidied up, he noticed the words Nie Dan had written for Qiao Rong.

Cheerfully, he said, “Nie-da-ge, did you know that your beautiful writing is famous?”

“I haven’t practiced in years; my hand has grown rusty. I only wrote a few sets for your cousin to hang on the wall.”

You Miao was well aware that Qiao Rong must admire Nie Dan, and just maybe, Nie Dan had a bit of interest in Qiao Rong as well. He didn’t ask a single word about it, though, and Nie Dan didn’t make any declarations. After all, no one here was a child; they should all know the weight of things. If Nie Dan genuinely liked Qiao Rong, he would certainly ask for her hand in marriage. You Miao was not the least bit worried about them.

Looking through every calligraphy set, You Miao noticed that they were all poetry verses that Qiao Rong liked. And on the side was Nie Dan’s own fan, probably for Qiao Rong to look at.

“Da-ge, won’t you write something on another fan for me?” he asked.

Nie Dan answered readily, “What do you want?”

“Let me see what’s written on your fan first.”

When the four became sworn brothers, Nei Dan gifted each of them a fan. Li Zhifeng got “Those who excel in war have no illustrious military exploits,” Zhao Chao’s was “The country is broken, yet the mountains and rivers remain,” and You Miao’s own was “Match with an adversary face to face and the brave will emerge victorious.” You Miao had always been very curious what was quoted on Nie Dan’s fan. He made a grab for it, but Nie Dan evaded his reach.

“Why so curious?” Nie Dan asked.

“Let me see...” You Miao whined.

However, Nie Dan put the fan away. You Miao attempted again to snatch it, but he was no match for Nie Dan and couldn’t reach it no matter how hard he tried.

“You want the verses that your da-ge will write for you, so why are you grabbing for mine?” Nie Dan asked.

You Miao was only curious, but after failing to snatch the fan so many times, he became peeved instead. Face darkened with rage, he ignored Nie Dan and stood up to stomp out of the room.

Nie Dan laughed, amused, “Si-di, are you angry now? Come, come, I’ll let you look. Da-ge is only teasing you.”

“No, thank you!” You Miao snapped and left.

Nie Dan was at a loss—You Miao appeared fairly normal in front of others at court, but acted like this behind closed doors? How irrational!

[Chapter 54]

Fuming, You Miao returned to his room at Moyan Pavilion and slammed the door shut. Shortly after, Qiao Rong came to call him for dinner, and You Miao woke up just enough to irritably say he would pass before going right back to sleep.

It had been days since he had gotten a good night's rest, and he ended up sleeping until it was dark outside. Rubbing his bleary eyes, he stayed in bed in a muddled daze. At some point during his haze, he heard someone enter the room and sit at the edge of the bed. He felt the person pat his head. Thinking it was Nie Dan calling him to dinner, he rolled over to face the inside of the bed in an attempt to ignore him. But to his surprise, the person wrapped an arm around him and pressed a kiss to his ear. Startled to say the least, You Miao frantically tried to push him off only for his eyes to be covered by a hand.

And then that person kissed him full on the lips.

You Miao froze. A mighty noise roared in his skull. It was Li Zhifeng!

He reached out to touch him and trace the outlines of his face, his tall, straight nose, and then down to his chest. Li Zhifeng was wearing leather armor that was dirty and worn from travel, and which smelled of dust.

Immediately, You Miao pulled Li Zhifeng into a tight hug, and the two of them gripped each other with all their strength.

"Why are you back...? Am I dreaming?"

Despite his joy, tears welled in You Miao's eyes and streamed nonstop. Li Zhifeng didn't answer, and only sealed his lips with a kiss as he climbed into bed. He stripped off his armor and made short work of his inner robe as well before wrapping a strap of fabric around You Miao's eyes.

They tangled together naked and pressed skin to skin, hot and heavy, kissing and sucking, with Li Zhifeng smelling of the heady, masculine scent of sweat. Eager, Li Zhifeng kissed down You Miao's neck, along his collarbone, and then down to his chest, then to his belly, then lower.

"Ah..."

You Miao quivered and turned slightly to the side, his whole body twitching when Li Zhifeng took him into his mouth. Li Zhifeng sucked him off for a bit, then sat up, pulling You Miao up as well, and arranged You Miao to straddle him with his legs splayed.

Still in a daze, unsure whether this was a dream or reality, You Miao shut his eyes and lost himself in the feeling of Li Zhifeng's lips and tongue locking with his own. Li Zhifeng's arousal was already hard as iron; when You Miao reached down to grab it and try to shove it inside, his hand was stilled by Li Zhifeng's grip. Li Zhifeng took out the military-issue anti-frostbite cream he kept with him and coated his thick length with it, making his already sizable endowment look even more immense.

You Miao murmured, "Let me..." He took the cream and rubbed even more of it on, while muttering in a quiet voice, "We haven't done it for a year...it's definitely gonna hurt... Wait, why are you back?"

Li Zhifeng said nothing, but You Miao could feel the smile on his lips. He arched his eyebrows and asked, "Has the plan of defense changed?"

Holding You Miao by the waist, Li Zhifeng pressed into him.

It hurt like hell despite the thick layer of cream—it had been a year since You Miao had taken anything back there, after all. And it seemed that being away on the expedition for so long had also left Li Zhifeng with significant pent-up needs, if the hardness of his cock as it pushed into You Miao was any indication.

Though it hurt at first, You Miao didn't want Li Zhifeng to stop. They held on tight to one another; You Miao couldn't see anything at all, and only felt Li Zhifeng's weight on him as he fucked into him. The feeling of fullness made him swallow time and again as an incomparable pleasure washed over him. Once they'd made it past the initial pain, the relentless thrusts—each and every one driving all the way into the deepest parts of him—made You Miao felt so good that he couldn't help but scratch desperately at Li Zhifeng's body, at times crying out and at times begging.

"Hush now..." Li Zhifeng whispered.

Li Zhifeng captured You Miao's lips with his own and held his hands down at the headboard. You Miao's tears had already soaked through the black cloth of the blindfold, and now his lips were also sealed. Li Zhifeng's hot tongue fervently caressed his own as he plunged deeply into You Miao once again. Just like that, the arousal set ablaze within You Miao from their long separation was trapped inside as Li Zhifeng invaded him from above and below, leaving him trembling and with a flush spreading down his neck.

Li Zhifeng drove inside, again, then suddenly picked up his pace. The sensations were so overwhelming that You Miao couldn't even cry out. In

that moment, tingling pulsed across his scalp, his entrance clenched, and his entire mind went blank. His pleasure had reached its climax and he could feel his own hardness twitching and letting out slow spurts of cum as Li Zhifeng fucked him through it.

It had been a long time since he'd last come in continuous waves like this. The familiar scent of Li Zhifeng's bare skin, the half-asleep daze he was in, and the warmth of Li Zhifeng's release inside of him—all of it felt so good that You Miao couldn't help but moan out loud before bursting into uncontrollable tears.

Li Zhifeng stopped and huffed out a breath. That was the fastest they'd ever finished. They hadn't been able to see each other for a whole year, separated by distance as they were, missing each other by the candlelight every day and night. They could hardly bear the torment of separation now that they'd seen each other again, and any words of affection had turned instead into a round of frantic, unrestrained fucking.

You Miao's mind was still blank when he felt Li Zhifeng pull out; with his eyes covered, maybe his brain had decided to follow suit as well. He could feel Li Zhifeng wiping them both clean with a cloth—You Miao had come all over himself and gotten some of it on Li Zhifeng as well. After they were both freshened up, Li Zhifeng finally spoke.

"What's wrong?" Li Zhifeng was puzzled. "Upset?"

Soon after, Li Zhifeng untied the strap binding You Miao's eyes. You Miao thought he was still dreaming, and wondered why this dream wasn't ending. But when the blindfold fell away and he saw Li Zhifeng's face, he finally came around.

"You've gotten thin." You Miao frowned.

"Been training too long," Li Zhifeng replied. "I wasn't starving, don't worry."

Wait a minute... You Miao questioned him, alarmed, "Why are you back? Has the plan of defense changed?!"

"I was worried about you after your last letter, so I snuck back," Li Zhifeng answered.

This startled You Miao—if the great commander that defended the border left his post without authorization, it was a crime punishable by death if the imperial court found out. But then, he realized Li Zhifeng was concerned about his mental state after his letter and had rushed back in

urgency. A little sad but also incredibly touched, You Miao hugged Li Zhifeng tightly, not letting go.

Skin pressing against skin, the two lay in the blankets in a comfortable silence.

"I missed you so much," You Miao said as he stroked Li Zhifeng's hair and caressed his stubble.

Li Zhifeng buried his face in You Miao's nape, sniffing eagerly like a wolf who had finally found his mate. "Me too."

Holding each other like this, You Miao's brain stopped working. Only a few words played on repeat: "I missed you so much," "I love you so much," and other such things. Li Zhifeng answered each phrase with a "mn," and didn't say anything else. Not long after, Li Zhifeng actually fell asleep like that. You Miao had so much he wanted to say to him, but he let him sleep. Li Zhifeng was obviously exhausted, having traveled nonstop in his rush to return. Curled in his arms, You Miao went back to his unwitting slumber once more.

They slept until halfway through the night when the sound of knocking woke them. Nie Dan's voice soon followed.

"Have the two of you become immortals? You haven't eaten all day."

You Miao was startled awake, and Li Zhifeng immediately opened his eyes.

"Da-ge."

"Come out and eat something before going back to sleep," Nie Dan said.

Feeling incredibly embarrassed, You Miao rolled out of bed to light the lamps and get dressed. When Li Zhifeng got out of bed, he stretched and yawned to the sky, looking wholly like a wild wolf. He had wanted to dress You Miao, but You Miao stopped him.

"Wait, let me take a look at you," You Miao said with a smile.

The two of them stood without a stitch of clothing on. You Miao appraised Li Zhifeng, his eyes roaming up and down his naked body.

Li Zhifeng wasn't bothered and turned to look at himself in the mirror. "What?"

He was indeed thinner than he was when they parted, but also much stronger—his abdominals were chiseled and his back was beautifully toned. He might have thinned, but his muscles were lean and tough. Evidently, he did not slack on his martial arts training despite commanding an army for a

year. You Miao examined his body carefully, checking to see if he was injured anywhere, and was very pleased to find no fresh scars.

The staring was making Li Zhifeng hard again, however, and You Miao reached out to pet the massive stallion length.

"You want more? Shall we do it again?" Li Zhifeng asked, deadpan.

Blushing, You Miao declined, "No, no, maybe in a bit."

Li Zhifeng then pulled You Miao into his arms and helped him dress. After roughly tidying themselves, Li Zhifeng held You Miao's hand and the two went down the long corridor.

Qiao Rong had already set out the night feast and warmed the wine. You Miao was so hungry that he felt faint as he walked, and as soon as he sat down, he exclaimed, "I'm starving!"

Resigned, Nie Dan shook his head with a grin. Li Zhifeng served You Miao's meal first before he turned to pour wine for Nie Dan.

"How is the warfront situation?" Nie Dan asked.

"Same as always," Li Zhifeng said. "I was worried about Maocheng, which is why I made this trip down."

You Miao knew Li Zhifeng had to have given Nie Dan a heads-up before he traveled back to Maocheng, or else Nie Dan wouldn't have known this quickly.

As he ate, Nie Dan said, "You best hurry back, don't let anyone know. Once everything here is settled, I'll join you on the frontlines."

Li Zhifeng appeared grim, however. He turned to You Miao. "I was just about to ask you. Didn't you say last time that you were coming to the frontlines to await negotiations with the Tartars?"

"Yeah?" You Miao was taken aback. "I've made all the arrangements. What?"

Li Zhifeng turned to Nie Dan. "The Army Supervisor lao-san designated for the Northern Expedition Army is Li Yan."

You Miao was stunned to hear this news. He dropped what he was eating and exclaimed in shock, "How can that be?! What's he doing, sending Li Yan?!"

Li Zhifeng said, "A secret edict came three days ago, telling me to wait for Li Yan and to prepare for the negotiations with the Tartars as soon as he arrives, in order to bring back the two emperors lost in the north."

You Miao was dumbfounded.

Nie Dan, however, said after a brief contemplation, “Understandable. Given the current situation, si-di should not leave Maocheng. After all, Political Advisor Sun is bedridden and the Administration Chamber needs someone to hold down the fort.”

“But that’s not what Zhao Ch—what His Majesty said!” You Miao cried. “Are we going to negotiate peace *now*? How come he didn’t tell me anything?!”

Li Zhifeng gazed at him and consoled, “Maybe he’s worried it’ll be too strenuous for you, so he didn’t let you go?”

You Miao suddenly had a strange feeling. Sending Li Yan wasn’t a big deal in itself, but there was definitely something wrong with Zhao Chao doing that without consulting him. Was Zhao Chao trying to do something behind his back? That couldn’t be. There couldn’t possibly be any reason for him to hide anything from You Miao, no matter what he wanted to do—You Miao was the only one left at court right now who genuinely and earnestly kept him in his thoughts.

Perhaps Li Yan had been the one who requested to go, but that wasn’t the point... After all, You Miao was already prepared to bring Li Yan along when he’d been planning to go on this diplomatic mission. Could it be...? The most unlikely of conclusions came to him, but he didn’t think it’d be the case.

The only possibility was that Zhao Chao was intentionally distancing himself from him. Maybe it was to protect him. But did that mean the process of bringing the two emperors back would still go as originally planned?

The more You Miao thought about it, the more something felt amiss. Could Li Yan convince Zhao Zhuo to abdicate? Or rather, did Zhao Chao believe Li Yan could handle this better than him?

“That’s not right. How could he lie to me about this? I’ve got everything arranged for him...”

“What did you arrange for him?” Nie Dan asked, sounding nonchalant.

Stumped, You Miao realized he accidentally misspoke in front of Nie Dan. Li Zhifeng understood and stepped in when he saw You Miao’s uneasy look.

“You and Zhao Zhuo aren’t well acquainted,” he pointed out, changing the subject.

“True.” You Miao had to admit Li Yan was indeed a better candidate than him in this respect.

“Er-di, will you be escorting Li Yan?” Nie Dan asked. When Li Zhifeng nodded, he said, “Promise me that you will protect them well.”

Li Zhifeng gave a curt nod. “Understood.”

“Then I will have no remaining worries,” Nie Dan said cheerfully.

“Don’t say that, da-ge,” Li Zhifeng said. “You’ll still have a chance to serve the country.”

“I’m tired.” Nie Dan sighed. “I know it’s unfair to burden you with the heavy responsibility of the frontier, and as the prince of Quanrong, there really is no need for you to exhaust yourself for Tianqi...”

Li Zhifeng stopped him and said, “I’m doing this for Ziqian and the promise san-di made me.”

Nie Dan gave a light smile and patted him on the shoulder.

“If all goes well, it will be time to utilize available talents when His Majesty returns; he won’t do anything to you, san-di. So just relax,” Nie Dan said. “When the time comes, whatever the situation, I will stand at the center to smooth things out. Once the Central Plains are reclaimed, I will wash my hands and relinquish my commander’s seal and go live a normal life of an ordinary man—get married, work a few hectares of humble land, raise some chickens.”

You Miao was silent through this conversation, occupied by the vague feeling something had gone wrong. He missed what Nie Dan had said until the last sentence that changed the subject. What did Nie Dan mean? And then it clicked—it was extremely possible that Nie Dan now wanted to form a family. He had likely fallen in love. And with who else could that be, except Qiao Rong?

The abacus in You Miao’s head had always worked perfectly; people usually only needed to say the first half of the sentence before he guessed what came next. Immediately, he said, “What do you mean by ‘humble’ land? In the future, this restaurant and twenty percent of Riverwave Estate will belong to you, da-ge.”

His words implied that he would grant Qiao Rong an invaluable dowry. Understanding what he meant immediately, Nie Dan gave a hearty laugh.

“No need, no need! Your da-ge isn’t the sort to live off of a bride’s family. I’ve saved up some over the years.”

Li Zhifeng was still a little shocked at first, but slowly came around afterward. He grinned. "*I'm* the sort to live off of a bride's family, though."

Nie Dan burst out laughing at that, unable to hold himself back. "In the future, Riverwave Estate will become a dowry and follow you to Quanrong, and that'll settle it."

You Miao was flushed bright red and Li Zhifeng only laughed.

As the three brothers toasted to the moon, You Miao couldn't help thinking that it would've been nice if Zhao Chao was here with them. Even though nothing they had discussed today was anything Zhao Chao would want to hear—whether it was about bringing Zhao Zhuo back or their retirement, all of it excluded him. Having considered this, You Miao again felt Nie Dan wasn't very nice to his little brother Zhao Chao.

Whether it was when Zhao Chao was still the Third Prince, or now when he had ascended the throne, it always seemed as if Nie Dan held too-great expectations of him. Zhao Chao was like a child for whom no one loved or cared, with an overly strict father and elder brothers who were equally so. No one praised him when things were done right, but he would always be punished when things were done wrong.

But everyone considered this Zhao Chao's duty, so it was natural. Even Nie Dan. You Miao had wanted to ask Nie Dan about it, but then again, although Nie Dan was ruthless with Zhao Chao, he was even more ruthless with himself. He never asked for recognition or acclaim when he won battles. In all these years, perhaps Nie Dan had bound Zhao Chao to the same beliefs he had bound himself.

That night, You Miao wondered why Nie Dan favored Li Zhifeng so much. Maybe it was precisely because Li Zhifeng was not responsible for Tianqi, and that nothing he did was out of duty. For Zhao Chao, You Miao, and Nie Dan, the revival and survival of the nation *was* their duty, which would explain why Nie Dan was so hard on them.

It was logical, all common knowledge. But You Miao still thought that the whole world had been too unfair to Zhao Chao—not just Nie Dan. If You Miao were in his place, even he would develop a rebellious attitude.

* * *

The three brothers drank past midnight, after which You Miao and Li Zhifeng returned to their room. Under the candlelight, You Miao curled up

in Li Zhifeng's arms. The two hugged each other tight, reluctant to sleep, knowing that Li Zhifeng would need to return to the frontlines at daybreak. Their parting would spell another three to five months of separation.

"What are you thinking about? You've been down since we started drinking," Li Zhifeng asked.

"Thinking about san-ge," You Miao replied.

Li Zhifeng understood immediately. "It's a good thing for him, too. Relieving himself of his burdens and passing them to Zhao Zhuo means he can take a break and spend his days unencumbered."

"You guys all think things are so simple," You Miao mumbled. "You and Nie-da-ge are both military officers; your expertise is in directing armies and combat. You guys have never experienced the internal strife at court, all that intrigue and jockeying for power, so you don't understand. Should Zhao Zhuo return, he would never tolerate Zhao Chao hanging around, especially when he still has our support."

"Oh?" Li Zhifeng said. "So?"

"So the best-case scenario is Zhao Zhuo refusing to let him take command of the army. Things will go back to the way they used to be at the old capital."

"Isn't that a good thing? He can live a peaceful life, then," Li Zhifeng wondered.

You Miao replied, exasperated, "Do you think he was satisfied with the life he had back then?"

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't he be?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao poked him on the skull, and Li Zhifeng tilted his head, watching You Miao with amusement.

"The two of us have a home, a life where we can depend on each other, and a mutual desire for a peaceful existence," You Miao said seriously. "So to you, to me, living anywhere is the same. Whether it's at the estate or wandering idly and roaming the earth, as long as you and I have each other, life would be good. The only reason why we're so bogged down right now is because of duty."

Li Zhifeng grunted in reply.

You Miao continued, "But what about him? What does he desire? Wasting away for the rest of his life in the city after abdication? Since the beginning, he's always been alone. He might think life bears little meaning and death doesn't matter. The only thing he ever prized were the vows we

made when we became sworn brothers. But then da-ge made him an emperor when the situation called for one, and now he's getting kicked out with Zhao Zhuo coming back."

"Got it," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao sighed. "He threw a fit at me last time we spoke—saying that after everything is over and the Central Plains are reclaimed, everyone will be gone, leaving him all alone."

"If he abdicates, Riverwave Estate could save a place for him," Li Zhifeng suggested.

"There are worse scenarios to consider," You Miao said. "One being Zhao Zhuo keeping him under house arrest to prevent trouble. And the worst of all being Zhao Zhuo having him killed."

Li Zhifeng sighed and nodded, offering no comment.

You Miao added in a low whisper, "He already expected that, so..."

He told Li Zhifeng the plan he devised for Zhao Chao.

"Then why is he sending Li Yan?" Li Zhifeng asked, confused.

"Maybe he thinks Li Yan and da-ge don't get along?" You Miao said. "Or maybe because he thinks I'll be coaxed over by Zhao Zhuo. But either way, you're responsible no matter who goes on this diplomatic mission. You're the armed escort, after all. You'll offend da-ge if Zhao Zhuo cedes the throne, and then neither of us will be able to remain brothers with him anymore."

"It doesn't matter to me. It depends on you, of course. You can let whoever you want be the emperor."

"Okay," You Miao said, laughing.

"I will not let him down," Li Zhifeng explained further. "Besides, he only wants me to protect the two emperors. He didn't say anything about protecting their titles."

Everything was incredibly simple in Li Zhifeng's eyes. You Miao couldn't describe how funny that was to him, and his mood was lifted.

The sky lightened.

Standing in front of the mirror, You Miao helped Li Zhifeng put on his armor. With a grin, he said, "It's always been you serving me, and now I finally get to serve you this once. When can you come back? When you're back, I'll be your slave and help dress you every day."

Li Zhifeng gazed at You Miao in the mirror's reflection. "I'll try to come back quickly. The message that came the other day said Li Yan was

already on the road. I'll have to get back to camp as soon as possible, lest they report me again if they can't find me there."

"No one would dare report you now." You Miao said with a laugh. "You can mess with Li Yan however you want; you're the only great general left in the government. Who would dare come looking for trouble?"

Li Zhifeng nodded. "When all this is over, I will personally escort Zhao Zhuo back and remain in Maocheng. I won't leave again."

You Miao shuffled close and kissed him on the lips, reluctant to part. "I'll wait for your return."

Li Zhifeng said in a whisper, "I love you, Ziqian."

The sudden confession touched You Miao's heart, swarming him with tremendous emotions that flooded all of his memories.

"I love you too, Sanado, my prince," You Miao whispered back.

At first, Li Zhifeng was stunned. Eyes brimming with unspeakable mixed emotions, he pulled You Miao into a fierce hug, kissing him with wild abandon until the scent of blood bloomed between their lips. Eventually, he let You Miao go and exited the door.

Before the sun had risen, the Quanrong prince marched once more for his beloved on the path of the expedition.

The waning moon hung on the horizon, and the rays of dawn spilled across the earth as each household rose early and opened their doors. Sitting on the veranda, You Miao did not feel a lick of fatigue despite not having slept that entire night. He knew Li Yan was already on his way to the warfront with Zhao Chao's treaty. He also knew that once Li Zhifeng returned to the army camp, the subsequent events would soon set off tempestuous new waves in Tianqi.

Nie Dan, You Miao, Li Zhifeng, Zhao Chao, Zhao Zhuo, Li Yan, Ping Xi... The Administration Chamber, the six ministries, the imperial court, the military... Everyone would be caught in this maelstrom of conflict; none would escape. This was perhaps the greatest hurdle Tianqi would face after establishing the new government in Jiangnan.

And in the distant north, the old homeland had yet to be reclaimed. Millions of soldiers were still awaiting that impending battle.

Illuminated is Chang'an, with a moon so bright,
Untold houses beating laundry resounding in the night.
Unceasingly blows the languishing autumn wind,
Freely flows only the Jade Pass's sentiment.

When will come the day the Barbarians are quelled,
And my husband can return from that distant march?[18]
[Arc 4 End]

Arc 5: Eight Beats of Ganzhou Song

《八声甘州》:宋:苏轼

有情风万里卷潮来,无情送潮归。
问钱塘江上，西兴浦口，几度斜晖？
不用思量今古,俯仰昔人非。谁似东坡老,白首忘机。
记取西湖西畔，正春山好处，空翠烟霏。
算诗人相得,如我与君稀。
约它年、东还海道，愿谢公雅志莫相违。
西州路,不应回首,为我沾衣

Eight Beats of Ganzhou Song - To Canliaozi[19]

Su Shi (A.D. 1037-1101) Song Dynasty
The feeling wind brings the tide ten thousand miles ashore,
The unfeeling wind sends the tide back to whence it came.
At Qiantang River, at Xixing Port,
How many times have we come to sunset’s close?
Think not of the present or past, for nothing lasts.
Who else ages like me, white-haired and carefree?
Remember the west shore of West Lake,
The vernal hills green, the emerald expanse, the clouds like mist.
When considering poets,
Rarely are they bosom friends like us.
I promise in the future, I will return to seclusion,
Unlike Lord Xie, to see this endeavor to conclusion.
Should I be gone, do not weep for me,
On Xizhou Road, do not look back.

[Chapter 55]

In Jiangnan's late spring, willow catkins filled the air.

Ten days after Li Zhifeng left, Zhao Chao finally announced his plans at court for the negotiations to bring back the two emperors. The procedure would be overseen by the Ministry of Rites and the Hanlin Academy. The Ministry of Rites would send Xie Quan to accompany the Academician Li Yan to the north, and in concert with Li Zhifeng's escort, they would cross the Hun and the Di territories to talk with the Tartars.

Meanwhile, the Tartars' internal fight over the throne had come to a conclusion. Kuzha Khan had passed away. Queen Baoiin, who came from the Five Barbarian Tribes, would be regent, and her son the young Prince Batu would ascend the throne.

The change might have sounded like good news to the Hans, but in reality, it was not so. Hemetir still wielded the military's might; the only difference was where they stationed their defenses. The Central Plains had been divided into East and West; the East belonged to the Tartars, and the West to the Huns. And farther west, toward the plains of West Liang, the territories were divided among the Di, Jie, and Qiang tribes.

The next critical step was to probe the Tartars about their attitude toward Tianqi. Peace or war was but a decision made on a whim. Xie Hui and Tang Xin's camp believed that if Queen Baoiin agreed to the peace talks, then for a long period of time thereafter—at least ten years—three separate governing bodies would emerge in the world. The Tartars would occupy the north and northeast of the Central Plains, and the other four Barbarian tribes, including the severely battered Xianbei, would split the land west and northwest of the Central Plains.

The Hans of Tianqi had retreated south of Hupao River to guard the south half of the country, forming the Southern Dynasty.

Once this situation had taken form, it would be time for the Southern Dynasty to vigorously strive to build a strong country. Military force should not be used within the next three to five years; the government should instead strive to develop the Jiangnan region and focus on restoring the nation's strength. It should bide its time, and go to war in the north only after enough troops had been raised.

Speculation though it may be, this situation was inevitable. Everyone at court agreed with Xie Hui's assessment. However, You Miao sharply realized that almost everyone was now ignoring Zhao Chao in all these discussions. After all, the responsibility for these issues would change hands once Zhao Zhuo returned.

Zhao Chao watched with cold detachment as the ministers continued their debate. Then all of a sudden, he cut in. "You Miao, what do *you* think?"

You Miao was a little lost in thought about the series of changes that would soon be initiated by Zhao Zhuo's abdication, and the abrupt question pulled him back down to earth.

"This subject believes the argument is reasonable," he said. When the crowd nodded, he added, "This year, Jiangnan harvested four hundred thousand bushels of grain. If we save that annual amount for a few years, it could feed an army of two hundred thousand. But right now our stores are empty after three consecutive years of war, so it is indeed time to regroup. Moreover, enactment of the reform went successfully, but only because last year and the year before were unprecedented times; Jiangnan had no choice but to accept it. The reform itself also contains many sections that are susceptible to abuse; the people need time to ease into it, to digest it. Additionally, army training requires time. Therefore, I agree with Lord Xie and Lord Tang's assessment: war should not be declared so easily in the next three years."

Zhao Chao didn't show any outward reaction and only nodded. "Then We shall go with everyone's advice."

After his statement, the court fell into a brief awkward silence.

Zhao Chao then added, "Anyone else have any memorials to submit? If so, bring them forth now."

The ministers were all thinking about Zhao Zhuo's return, so for the moment, no one had anything to report. Thus, Zhao Chao ended the assembly.

"We are tired as well. If there are no submissions, then let the court be dismissed."

He rose and left as the ministers bowed in succession.

This dismissal strangely carried a sense of bleak desolation. Despite their noise and gossip day after day as they discussed the return of the two

emperors in the north, the officials never would have expected that Zhao Chao had already made his decision a long time ago.

After the morning assembly, at last a summon came for You Miao—Zhao Chao wanted to see him. This would be the first time they'd meet in private since that huge fight with Nie Dan. Before, You Miao had been summoned practically every day; Zhao Chao always used to have something to discuss with him after every morning assembly. But recently, gradually, it felt as though Zhao Chao was avoiding him.

This had bothered You Miao for a few days, but then he remembered what Sun Yu had once mentioned about the trials of officialdom—one would have to face new challenges head-on after reaching higher positions; navigating the emperor's schemes and grappling with the checks and balances of powerful ministers. In the past, this had been true for the conflict between Sun Yu and Li Yan's father, the former Chancellor Li. The old emperor would sometimes ignore one of them, but that didn't necessarily mean that they'd lost favor or offended the ruler. This practice was normal; it allowed other ministers' opinions to be taken into consideration, and simultaneously prevented them from becoming overconfident. When You Miao thought of it like that, he didn't feel paranoid anymore.

When he at last met Zhao Chao today, however, You Miao noticed something—Zhao Chao had grown old.

It was indeed an advancing decline. When they saw each other at court in the mornings, they were separated by distance; You Miao couldn't see his face as clearly. But after coming to the imperial study, he discovered that Zhao Chao's hair had quite a number of white strands. He looked tired and drawn.

The last time he'd noticed this with Zhao Chao was when they'd met again after years of separation—when You Miao had returned to the capital for the state exams. Back then, Zhao Chao had transformed from a young man to a mature one. But now, he looked frail; failing before his time.

The sight made You Miao miserable. Suddenly, nothing he'd wanted to say could leave his lips.

"Has Your Majesty been having trouble sleeping?" You Miao asked.

"What do you think?" Zhao Chao countered.

"If you haven't been resting well, have the imperial physicians prescribe some tranquilizing medication for you," You Miao said.

Zhao Chao nodded. Not many memorials to the throne had been sent to Zhao Chao lately—You Miao knew this because most of them were sitting at the Administration Chamber, and he'd been the one handling them in Zhao Chao's stead. So what else could exhaust Zhao Chao like this? There was, of course, only *that*.

"Do you blame me for sending Li Yan and Xie Quan on the diplomatic mission instead of you?" Zhao Chao asked.

You Miao's heart stopped. Hastily, he replied, "This subject does not dare."

Under Zhao Chao's scrutinizing gaze, You Miao almost bowed—but he stopped himself. He couldn't let himself look too guilty at a time like this; he could not dodge Zhao Chao's eyes.

Instead, he said, "It was certainly more suitable for Your Majesty to send Li Yan and Xie Quan. Li Yan was on good terms with Zhao Zhuo in the past, and Xie Quan can represent the Jiangnan gentry."

Zhao Chao nodded. "Mn."

Still a little concerned, however, You Miao said, "I'm just worried Li Yan won't be able to handle the mission."

"He will," Zhao Chao said. "You forget, that little bastard Li Yan is also someone who understands the whole picture and prioritizes accordingly."

You Miao nodded silently.

"We know you are worried," Zhao Chao continued. "Li Yan used to be in my brother's faction, after all, and letting him go to the negotiations might give him the opportunity to change the direction of the wind. But if Li Yan wants to continue to climb the political ladder, he still needs to rely on Us. My brother will not place him in an important position."

"Yes," You Miao had to agree.

Zhao Chao stood up and paced in front of his desk. "In the past, my brother also kept his guard up against him—or rather, he guarded against both the Li father and son. My brother trusts no one. Even if I abdicate upon his return, the only ones he will want on his side are the Jiangnan gentry. He won't treasure his old ties with Li Yan; there are no benefits for Li Yan to reap."

You Miao understood now, and he agreed again, "Right."

"I didn't let you go because I wanted to extricate you from this whole mess," Zhao Chao said. "After all, it's still best for subjects to be involved as little as possible when it comes to dethronement. Your san-ge is very

much obliged that you were willing to handle the matter for me, but if you were to succeed, you would never escape the judgement of history—you'd be labeled as a crafty sycophant, and would carry that burden even after we die. Da-ge would also turn against you. If I can keep you out of this, then I will do so to the best of my ability. Let Li Yan be the treacherous minister instead."

The speech made You Miao conflicted; he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He knew Zhao Chao was doing this to protect him, so he nodded, feeling a little moved.

But Zhao Chao still didn't understand You Miao's character.

You Miao had always done what he believed was right. An army of thousands couldn't move his resolve when justice needed to be done. Perhaps Nie Dan had influenced him in this respect. If he accomplished something great, he would be praised among the brave in the pages of history. However, the loser is always in the wrong—if he failed, he would lose all standing and reputation and carry the burden of infamy through the ages.

Perhaps Li Yan had his own hardships that left him with no other choice.

For the rest of that day, Zhao Chao didn't mention the peace talks again. The court officials didn't know yet, but once Li Yan brought back the two emperors, it'd be hard to say how many of the ones who supported this motion would suffer Zhao Chao's revenge. Changing the subject, Zhao Chao started to talk about the recent memorials that had arrived at his desk, except his mind wasn't quite on the matter. You Miao watched him for a bit and laughed, unable to stop himself.

"What?" Zhao Chao demanded irritably.

With what had been bothering him lifted from his mind, You Miao didn't care to hide his thoughts anymore and continued to simply laugh. "You said not to worry, but *you're* still worried deep down. Why bother acting?"

Exasperated, Zhao Chao tossed the memorial in his hand to the side. He studied You Miao for a moment before he nodded. "Yes, I am worried, more or less."

"You didn't discuss it with me before you sent Li Yan out, that's why you're worried," You Miao stated.

Zhao Chao heaved a heavy sigh and replied, “I don’t want to depend on you for everything; like if I didn’t have you, I wouldn’t be able to do anything right.”

Anyone else might try to nervously decipher Zhao Chao’s kingly intent in those words, but You Miao could understand Zhao Chao’s feelings. What Zhao Chao said wasn’t solely directed at him, but also at Sun Yu who stood behind You Miao... Ever since Zhao Chao had taken on the burden of the throne, he had constantly followed others’ advice; as if he was a junior. Despite his emperor title, he had to watch his every step without a moment to relax.

Sun Yu and Nie Dan were like two elders who restricted him from both ends, civil and military. Even though Sun Yu had fallen ill, the power of the Administration Chamber remained—and You Miao was its current spokesperson.

After understanding where Zhao Chao was coming from, You Miao consoled him, “I think it’s a good thing, though, to have the Administration Chamber. The emperor is no saint, after all. ‘Listen to both sides and you will be enlightened; heed only one side and you will be benighted.’ That’s a principle passed down from the old ancestors. Even with advisors around, the danger of bias remains; never mind depending solely on Your Majesty to make all the decisions in the world.”

“I know,” Zhao Chao said quietly. “That’s precisely the case.”

“Things’ll get better after we’ve crossed this bridge,” You Miao said. “And honestly, people’s livelihoods and other such matters don’t affect the entire nation’s fate. In time, when everything is on track, Your Majesty could hand everything to the Administration Chamber; it would be easy to hold it accountable when problems occur.”

Zhao Chao nodded slowly.

A knock sounded just then, and the guard outside announced, “Lord Tang of the Administration Chamber requests an audience with Your Majesty.”

Zhao Chao grinned. “Speak of the devil.”

Oh no. You Miao, on the other hand, felt his stomach drop. What could Tang Bo possibly want to see Zhao Chao about at this hour?

As soon as Tang Bo entered the study, he dropped to his knees in prostration and exclaimed, “Your Majesty, please forgive this subject’s impudence. Mister Sun is not well.”

The sudden news greatly shocked both You Miao and Zhao Chao.

You Miao rushed back to the Administration Chamber, not even bothering to eat lunch. Sure enough, Sun Yu was almost at his end. He'd been shivering incessantly ever since You Miao had fed him breakfast that morning. Lately, only You Miao had been checking on Sun Yu in the evenings before bed. The other pupils at the Administration Chamber would dodge even greeting Sun Yu in the morning if they could help it. Most avoided Sun Yu's room entirely; it was a gloomy place, and a senior lying in their sickbed was not a pleasant sight to behold.

When Sun Yu had woken that morning, he'd trembled with saliva drooling from the corners of his mouth; every so often, he would gasp out unintelligible noises. His old servant was absent, having retired and returned home. It was the new maid who'd become particularly concerned with his condition tonight, and she'd gone to Tang Bo for guidance. That was when Tang Bo checked on Sun Yu, and immediately went to the palace to inform Zhao Chao of his worsening state.

Zhao Chao paid a visit, but despite the sudden downturn in Sun Yu's health, he was not yet near death. With not much else he could do, Zhao Chao charged You Miao to stay by the old man's bedside on his behalf and returned to the palace. The imperial physician arrived a short while later to attend to Sun Yu, but upon seeing him, the physician concluded that there was no saving him. He told You Miao and Tang Bo—Sun Yu's two pupils—to plan the funeral affairs. He would surely pass within the next few days.

Sun Yu simply lay there, neither dying nor improving, and showed no signs of wishing to discuss his last will and testament. His group of students stood in his room, by his side, until dusk—but he still hung on for all that time. Without a choice, many of them had to go home for the time being to attend to their own affairs—for example, Tang Bo's wife was due to give birth to their second child in the next few days.

After night fell, Nie Dan coincidentally came to look for You Miao. When he learned Sun Yu was at his end, he stayed with You Miao to keep vigil.

"Why don't you go to bed first? If anything happens, da-ge will call you," Nie Dan said.

"I can just put my head down and doze for a bit," You Miao replied.

Feeling drained in both body and mind, You Miao did just that and put his head down on the table while Nie Dan sat beside him, reading.

Normally when such a time came upon a major house, the wives, the concubines, the lawful and the common children, would all be present to hold vigil. However, Sun Yu never married—he had once set his eyes on the daughter of a prominent family in his younger years, but the Heavens were jealous of her beauty and took her life with an illness. Because he kept his vow to never marry another, when it was his time to go, his bedside was a sad and desolate sight—a single pupil accompanied by an equally alone Nie Dan.

You Miao couldn't help but think of himself, and of Li Zhifeng; he wondered which one of them would die first. It was so strange. When he first left home that day so many years ago to travel to the imperial capital, he never thought of the kind of person he'd become, or the things he'd do.

When he was younger, he was lost and ignorant, with no plans or goals for the future. After he got together with Li Zhifeng, it was like his life turned completely upside down. Even now, You Miao still wondered—if he opened the door right now and went outside, would he return to the same capital from seven years ago? Back to a time when the wastrel noble young masters hadn't yet become officials, and every early morning a horse carriage would be waiting to take him out on the town to play around...

The Nie Dan from seven years ago was equally undaunted by power and authority. He had stopped You Miao's carriage at the capital city gates looking to interrogate Li Zhifeng... You Miao peeked over his arms from where he'd sprawled over the table to study Nie Dan. His thoughts were being dragged far, far away this night, and he remembered the past and everyone's view of Nie Dan.

In retrospect, back when Nie Dan first returned to the imperial capital for debriefing, Li Yan had pointedly said: "*He might not be Zhao Chao's man*." And from the way things looked now, Nie Dan indeed was not. Staring at his profile, You Miao suddenly realized that everyone was wrong.

Everyone boasted that the political arena was a place of peril, that not a single wrong step could be taken; the civil officials all looked down on the military officers, believing that they didn't have the calculating minds required to be proper members of the court. But judging from the present situation, Nie Dan was the one that best knew how to be an official. Back at the old capital, Zhao Zhuo and Zhao Mao had handed him the military without worry; after the capital fell, it was also him and Sun Yu who'd held up the unstable, half-broken country. Nie Dan had cemented his position,

never to be shaken. In these past years, numerous impeachments and reports of misconduct were submitted to court, but no one ever dared to move him. He gave no one anything to hold over him, either. Before great justices and great wrongs alike, he had given no leniency in expediting the execution of decisions.

"What's on your mind?" Nie Dan asked abruptly. He had long since noticed that You Miao was staring at him.

Obviously, You Miao wasn't going to share what he was thinking about, so he only responded with a chuckle. "Thinking about when you're gonna marry."

"Enough." A light blush colored Nie Dan's handsome face, and he scolded, "You are now one of Tianqi's pillars, where's your sense of proper conduct?"

The other stuff You Miao wouldn't dare joke about with him, but he would with this subject. He laughed and almost gave him Qiao Rong's hand then and there, but at the end of the day, Qiao Rong was older and You Miao younger. Although You Miao currently enjoyed the highest status within the You and Qiao families, marriage was a topic that hinged on Qiao Rong's own wishes, so it was not You Miao's place to speak rashly about it. He would have to talk to Qiao Rong first before he acted.

Nie Dan seemed to have guessed You Miao's considerations, but he didn't comment, and only said mildly, "Xiandi, there's no need to trouble yourself over your yuxiong's affairs; your teacher has great expectations of you. And you should worry about your san-ge, rather than your da-ge."

"Why worry about san-ge? What's there to w..."

You Miao trailed off when he realized Nie Dan was right. Throughout history, royal princes had married around the age of fifteen or sixteen. Zhao Chao wasn't that young anymore, but he'd had no consorts in the past, never mind an empress currently. Except You Miao had the guts to talk to Zhao Chao about anything save for advising him on this subject. While he couldn't be sure whether he was the reason Zhao Chao hadn't married, if he brought up the subject too rashly, Zhao Chao would definitely make him get married too. He best not shoot himself in the foot.

"Subjects shouldn't stick their noses in the royal family's family affairs so much. Let him do as he likes," You Miao said, dodging the topic.

As though Nie Dan had predicted You Miao's response, he countered, "You see, the affairs of the royal family are the affairs of the country. It has

been this way since ancient times. Who will inherit the throne and lead the common people if the emperor has no heir? What a subject fears the most is the lack of an heir to the throne, so how can you let the matter be?"

"But with the way things are developing, it's not like he'll be the emperor," You Miao said.

Nie Dan fell silent at this.

"Da-ge, when you and Mister Sun first made this decision, what was Mister Sun's stance?"

Having asked this question, You Miao became antsy. He knew it was a subject to avoid, but he still couldn't help opening his mouth.

Nie Dan glanced at the bed where Sun Yu lay, now asleep once more. He held his old, wizened wrist to feel for his pulse—which still beat yet. He sighed.

"To be honest, that issue also has made your da-ge feel quite lost. Since it concerns the country and the people..."

You Miao listened quietly.

"...But there are certain matters that one has no choice in. All people are like this; they easily fawn upon the rich and powerful and forget justice in the face of gain. But bribery, for example, might be something that can't be helped—some officials can barely support themselves on their monthly salary, so should they embezzle or let their families go homeless?"

You Miao finally understood Nie Dan's principles.

Nie Dan continued, "There are many things that have been privately decided upon by everyone, though not mentioned aloud. However, as long as there is a wrong committed, something must be done to correct it. You cannot claim that you can't be bothered to take action simply because it works as it is, consequently allowing the rest of court to follow suit. My power and your teacher's power might be weak, but when everyone is in the wrong, we must step forward. We cannot all wallow in the same mire."

He stared You Miao in the eyes and said, "At the very least, when future history books mention our dynasty, da-ge doesn't want them to say: *'In Tianqi's final years, the Barbarians entered the Central Plains, the two emperors were captured, and the kingdom was humiliated. Yet from the Son of Heaven above to the ministers below, none spoke of the matter, nor was the subject of bringing the two emperors back discussed. Thousands of years of Han integrity were destroyed in a day.*'"

You Miao didn't dare to utter a sound. Nie Dan's words were like a slap to his face.

"The country can fall, the homeland can be conquered, but our integrity must not die," Nie Dan said. "Since ancient times, the Barbarians' sovereignty has never lasted. Although they frequently encroached upon our borders, they have never completely annihilated the people of the Central Plains. It is because of our integrity. I'm sure this is something that you and other men of books know better than us."

At that moment, You Miao was swayed for a split second and he nodded. He didn't dare imagine how furious Nie Dan would be when everything was over; maybe he would turn hostile against Zhao Chao and they part ways.

The sky was gradually lightening, but Sun Yu only continued to gasp softly as he hung on by a thread—neither living nor dying. As morning rolled around, the supervisory secretaries paid Sun Yu a visit before their morning lesson.

Very concerned, You Miao told Tang Bo, "Let's prepare the funeral affairs. I don't know what Mister Sun is waiting for."

"Maybe news from the north," Tang Bo said.

His answer anguished You Miao; who knows for how much longer Sun Yu could hang on. You Miao was the first to pull out his money and the other supervisory secretaries followed, tossing broken silvers into a porcelain bowl normally used for washing brushes—a tael of silver or five coins apiece. However, they were only adding to the pool to express their sincerity; they knew You Miao was rich and would surely give Sun Yu an elaborate and stately funeral.

"I heard Mister Sun say once that he didn't want an elaborate funeral," Tang Bo said to You Miao. "If word got out that he was buried with fanfare, it would destroy his reputation for frugality. And should *he* find out once he's down below, we'd be letting him down."

This gave You Miao a real headache. Indeed, in the past when Sun Yu taught him, he mentioned that frugality for the sake of providing one's parents with an elaborate, flashy funeral was absolute bull. Everything was laid to rest in death, and that money would be better served providing the surviving sons and daughters with a good life.

"It's true that Mister Sun has been against extravagance his whole life," You Miao replied, "But he was talking about the poor and distressed, the

ones who have no means for living. Look at us. Which one of us look so poor that we can't provide for ourselves, and have to sell everything to bury our fathers?"

The supervisory secretaries all nodded in agreement.

"If anything, I'll still listen to everyone's opinions," You Miao continued. "The Administration Chamber has always been about the general consensus. You guys can have a say in Mister Sun's funeral. Let's see if there are more votes for an elaborate ceremony, or if there are more of us who prefer not to be so extravagant. We'll go with the majority. Whatever the choice may be, I'll talk to His Majesty about it."

Tang Bo considered his suggestion, but still didn't dare to make any rash decisions.

"Let's go with that, then," he said at last. "The matter can be big or small; I can't decide, either..."

You Miao explained further, "Mister Sun has been frugal all his life; that's on his own insistence, and it gives him peace of mind. We students abide by his words, so we're not really in a position to force anything on him. But if he isn't given an elaborate funeral when he passes, not only will His Majesty disagree, we'd feel uneasy about it as well. Honestly, a dead person won't find out anything after they pass. The way I see it, Mister Sun doesn't actually care what people say about him. You say the ceremony is for him, but I think it's more to buy peace of mind for those of us who are still living."

His speech made Tang Bo conflicted, unsure whether to laugh or cry. You Miao had completely exposed the thoughts on his mind, and the supervisory secretaries also felt awkward. While everyone wanted to earn a good name by being filial, they were at the same time worried the Censorate would report them for wasteful expenditure, which was ultimately the reason why they wanted You Miao to shoulder the responsibility—no one would dare report You Miao for misconduct, and he was aware of this. In any case, what had to be said was said, and the bare-footed aren't afraid of those who wear shoes. Everyone relaxed.

Just as the group were discussing Sun Yu's funeral arrangements, an official from the Supreme Court arrived.

"How is Mister Sun's condition? There is urgent business from the frontlines; His Majesty is waiting for the Administration Chamber to send someone to the meeting."

You Miao and Tang Bo stopped their discussion, and everyone looked at the official.

"Mister Sun fell asleep after breakfast," You Miao replied. "What is it? You can tell us straight."

"Reports have come from the warfront; negotiations are over and Hanlin Li is back. Adjutant Xie and General Huwei are currently escorting His Majesty and the Grand Emperor back to court!"

The news was no different from dropping a cannon ball in the Administration Chamber—everyone was shocked.

Nie Dan overheard as he walked in from the corridor, and he questioned, "They've received them already?"

The official answered, "They are currently on their way back. General Huwei is making a brief stop at Mount Qi to regroup, but he estimated they'll arrive in Yang Prefecture in five days! His Majesty is currently summoning officials from every department to welcome the return of the two emperors... Hanlin Li returned ahead of time."

You Miao's heart pounded, unsure of how to respond for the moment.

"I will go to the palace at once," Nie Dan said. "Ziqian, are you coming?"

You Miao came back around. "I will in a bit. I've still got things to take care of here. How about this? Tang Bo, you go with General Nie to court..."

Tang Bo nodded in acknowledgment. Nie Dan nodded as well, knowing You Miao needed to arrange Sun Yu's funeral affairs, and the two left. The supervisory secretaries went to their morning lesson, each occupied with different thoughts while You Miao returned to the inner courtyard with mixed feelings.

Inside the room, Sun Yu's eyes were closed. It was unclear whether he was alive or dead.

You Miao approached his bedside and said softly, "Sir, there is news from the frontlines. We have brought back the two emperors."

Sun Yu panted slowly and shuddered as he opened his eyes. He somehow mustered enough strength to grip You Miao's hand, and he turned his head to stare at him. Understanding dawned on You Miao—Sun Yu really had been hanging on by his last breath in order to await news from the frontlines. Now that he'd heard the two emperors had returned to court, he could finally let go.

Hurriedly, You Miao yelled out the door, “Tell all the supervisory secretaries to come! Mister Sun is delivering his last words!”

Sun Yu was still unable to speak, but the warfront news seemed to have given him a second wind. The doors opened and the supervisory secretaries swarmed in, crowding the room. You Miao was the first to kneel down, the others followed, and all of them prostrated with the utmost respect.

In his last moments, Sun Yu surprisingly seemed in better condition; his expression was calm and at ease. He gave a light knock to the side of the bed with his fingers. You Miao looked up, then brought over a paper and brush and placed them in Sun Yu’s hands. Trembling, Sun Yu used every ounce of strength he had left to write a sentence.

“Sir, do you have anything else to tell the pupils?” You Miao asked.

A smile appeared on Sun Yu’s face, and he handed You Miao the brush. Clutching You Miao’s fingers, a soft gasp escaped his throat as he closed his eyes. He passed away just like that, aged seventy-three years.

Overwhelming grief and bitter weeping thundered within the halls of the Administration Chamber. Holding the paper in his hands, tears involuntarily streamed down You Miao’s face, dampening Sun Yu’s will.

He had already prepared for this moment many years ago. But even though You Miao had witnessed an incalculable amount of death and separations, there were times when he was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to shoulder the burden when Sun Yu left this world. Alas, the day arrived nonetheless. He wasn’t as shaken as he’d thought he’d be, nor was he gripped by terrible sorrow. Everything had flowed smoothly and naturally, as though all had gently and methodically followed its natural course before anyone had noticed. One by one, Sun Yu had handed off every one of his heavy responsibilities, just as he had planned since the first day he re-established the Administration Chamber.

Sun Yu had lived all alone in the world, and now he departed it insouciant and carefree—leaving behind only a poem.

When the royal north-bound army reclaims the Central Plains,
Forget not to tell your father good tidings at his grave.[20]

Somehow, the words triggered a profound sadness in You Miao, and he cried so hard he was going to retch. Emotions he had suppressed for so long finally found their release at the moment of Sun Yu’s death. Tears still streaming, he rose to his feet and forced himself to calm down before he wrote the announcement informing the six ministries. He then sent a

messenger to court to report to Zhao Chao. He wrote more memos, prepared paperwork, and arranged the mourning post.

When the supervisory secretaries had finished weeping and withdrew from the room, You Miao went back inside to keep Sun Yu company. He requested boiled water, with which he washed the body and then dressed it in the funeral garment that he'd purchased previously—personally handling the remains himself all the way. Shortly after he was finished, You Miao heard an announcement outside that His Majesty had ended the morning assembly and had arrived with the court officials.

Zhao Chao waited in the reception hall in the outer courtyard. As per the rules, he could not enter the area so impulsively—lest the emperor's dragon aura clash with the soul of the dead and give Sun Yu no peace after death. Tang Bo joined You Miao in Sun Yu's room and helped him wash their teacher's body, and once it had been dressed, a coffin was carried inside to settle the remains. As soon as the coffin lid shut, the tears flowed once more inside the Administration Chamber.

They wept the entire morning, lamenting with extreme sorrow as the coffin was nailed closed and stored inside a temporary funerary shelter in the compound to await burial. Taking the lead for his colleagues, You Miao put on mourning clothes. After all this was done, Zhao Chao finally came over. Extending the respect of a pupil, he gave Sun Yu a quick cup of his hands in salute before the other officials approached to give three prostrations.

"Where's You Miao?" Zhao Chao asked.

"He's inside tidying Mister Sun's belongings," Tang Bo answered. "Let me call him over."

"I'll go," Zhao Chao said.

As You Miao, tears rolling, cleaned and packed up Sun Yu's belongings, he discovered two letters Sun Yu had written when he was alive. As it turned out, his will had already been prepared...ever since the day You Miao returned to the Administration Chamber.

The first letter was about the Administration Chamber, in which he told Zhao Chao to check and balance its power. If You Miao could be used, then he could be considered to take charge of the Administration Chamber. If You Miao could not be used, then Zhao Chao was to place him in the Censorate and have Tang Bo take charge of the Administration Chamber. Xie Hui could then temporarily take on the position of Political Advisor.

The second letter was about the division of his assets. His collection of calligraphy and paintings would go to Tang Bo, and his abundant collection of books would go to You Miao. Every supervisory secretary would be given a personally-transcribed copy of "*Standards of Being a Good Pupil and Child*" from his library. Finally, everyone would receive a top-grade hare-haired brush as a remembrance.

Seals made of lantian jade and chicken-blood stone, as well as other gems, would enter the grave with Sun Yu. There was an inkstone embellished with sunset clouds, blue smoke, and purple ebony beads amongst Sun Yu's possessions; on its back, the following words were etched: *"The Great Path is non-action."* This was a gift awarded by the emperor twenty years ago, and it would be given to His Majesty. It was Sun Yu's hope that whenever His Majesty saw the inkstone, he would be reminded of his father and elder brother lost to the north, and that he would do all he could to make the country prosperous and ultimately reclaim the Central Plains.

"Anything else?" Zhao Chao asked.

"No," You Miao replied. "He presented us with this set of couplets at the time of his passing."

He showed Zhao Chao the paper, and Zhao Chao nodded.

"You keep it. And put those letters away. Who else has seen them?"

Knowing Zhao Chao had his own plans, You Miao hesitated for a moment before he answered, "There shouldn't be anyone else aside from me. Only Tang Bo and I have the authority at the Administration Chamber to enter Mister Sun's room, and Tang Bo probably wouldn't think about rummaging around."

Zhao Chao took the first letter and almost tore it up, but thought better of it at the last second and tucked it away instead.

You Miao asked, "The Political Advisor position is now vacant. Are you going to keep it empty?"

"No, I want *you* to be the Chancellor," Zhao Chao replied in a low voice. "Remember well—do not mention this letter to anyone else. I will forge another one that says Political Advisor Sun nominates you."

This startled You Miao. "*No*! I'm only *how old* this year? No one will accept that!"

Zhao Chao frowned. "That's why it'll be announced using Political Advisor Sun's name. What are you scared of? I wasn't that old either when

I became the emperor. I need someone to aid me, and it's time to promote you. You'll be sitting in your teacher's seat in from now on..."

You Miao was incredibly uneasy. After all, this was too great a motion, and although it was an extremely opportune chance, it was nonetheless exceedingly disrespectful to the dead to make false use of Sun Yu's will.

You Miao tried, "Don't hurry on this decision..."

"Fear not, I've thought of everything," Zhao Chao replied easily. "We'll have to settle the matter with my brother first before we can get to you. Relax, there's still time. But use it to prepare yourself."

Eyes filled with expectations, he patted You Miao on the shoulder. It wasn't a good time to disobey him, so You Miao nodded anxiously as Zhao Chao left.

[Chapter 56]

That afternoon, Nie Dan came to the Administration Chamber again to pay his respects. An endless stream of officials would also visit over the coming week, though mourning Sun Yu might not be their primary order of business—for they swarmed You Miao afterward. All the while, You Miao's mind was heavily weighed down. No one knew if Li Yan had succeeded in his mission, and now Zhao Chao was trying to forge Sun Yu's will. These worries were making him lose his appetite for food and sleep alike, and on top of that, visitors were coming in droves trying to sound him out.

Tensions were high right now—no one knew what would happen next, or in which direction Tianqi would go. But the Administration Chamber remained of utmost importance regardless of whether Zhao Chao or Zhao Zhuo was in power. The officials couldn't be sure if Zhao Zhuo would continue to keep You Miao in such a critical role; after all, what happened at the old capital was no secret. You Miao had rescued many from the old six ministries, and he was also on excellent terms with the former Crown Prince's faction. It would be hard to say whether You Miao would retain his position of power when Zhao Zhuo returned.

Although he was preoccupied by all these issues, You Miao still had to force a smile to receive the endless visitors. As Sun Yu was considered to have reached a venerable age, a celebration of longevity was held alongside the wake, and the condolence money was coming in five or ten taels of silver. The students of the Hanlin Academy had jointly gifted an elegiac verse, "Noble Character and Sterling Integrity," and sent twenty taels of pure silver. You Miao only kept two of the taels and returned the rest; he couldn't take money from poor students.

As for the rest of the officials, You Miao assessed them by their backgrounds—he would accept everything from the immensely wealthy gentry, but it wouldn't be appropriate to take too much from uncorrupt officials. After roughly counting the gains of the whole day, there were over a thousand taels. You Miao and Tang Bo talked it over, and decided to use some of the money on repairs at the Administration Chamber and put the rest away to sponsor impoverished students in the future. The civil state exams would be held again next year, it would be good to prepare some

funds to nurture the next pillars of the country. Surely, that would follow Sun Yu's wishes.

It was Tang Bo's turn to keep vigil tonight. You Miao had worried himself into complete exhaustion, so when he returned to his room, he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow with no more care for anything else.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep, but obviously he thought it wasn't long enough when he felt someone shake him. He was instantly incensed.

"I'm trying to get some sleep here!" You Miao yelled angrily.

However, the one who'd had roused him was Tang Bo, and there were also ten other people crowding his room. You Miao composed himself. It was still the middle of the night—didn't everyone go home after building the funeral shed? Why were they all back at this time of evening?

You Miao snapped awake. "What's going on?"

No one spoke. There was pure silence inside the room as everyone stared at You Miao.

At last, Tang Bo spoke up, sounding grim, "The two majesties returning from the north passed away while crossing Qing County."

You Miao was suddenly at a loss for words.

"General Nie has already gone to the palace," Tang Bo said. "You best follow him, lest anything major happens."

Mind turning at lightning speed, You Miao grabbed a random robe, threw it on, and dashed out of his room. In two short sentences, Tang Bo had made things clear, and You Miao thought the same as he did—Zhao Chao had made a ruthless move, and had ordered the assassination of Zhao Zhuo and the Grand Emperor!

As soon as You Miao went outside, he abruptly discovered that all of Maocheng's security had been heightened. It was proof enough that the rumors of the emperors' deaths were true.

The imperial guards guarding the palace gates stopped You Miao's carriage. "Who goes there?!"

"Me," You Miao answered.

"No passage allowed to the palace!" When the imperial guard saw it was You Miao, he bowed, and his tone softened. "Lord You, please forgive this lowly one for his inability to let you through."

"Were these His Majesty's orders?" You Miao questioned.

“It’s General Tang’s order,” the guard replied.

“Since when was a curfew imposed?”

The guard thought for a moment. Knowing You Miao and Tang Hui were on friendly terms, he answered honestly, “Since the day before yesterday. Lord You did not come to court that day, which is why you did not know.”

You Miao figured it in his head; this meant the curfew started on the day Li Yan returned. Zhao Chao had to be linked to the death of the two emperors.

“How did General Nie get in?” You Miao questioned further. When the guards didn’t answer, he said, “If you weren’t able to stop him, then let me in, too. I’ll explain it to Tang Hui; you guys won’t be responsible.”

The guards still looked a little troubled, however, so You Miao added, “Or you can go in now and ask Tang Hui for direction. But you *will* be responsible if matters get delayed.”

Without a choice, the guards had to let him pass.

Feeling agitated, when the carriage passed by the inner palace, You Miao suddenly called out, “Stop.”

The carriage did so.

You Miao tiredly leaned back in his seat. He’d been thinking about what he should say to Zhao Chao this entire way. The news had come too quickly, too suddenly, and too shockingly; his thoughts had been in absolute chaos since the moment he woke. His mind had been blank when he mounted the carriage, and it remained blank when he entered the palace, so he still hadn’t thought of the words to say.

Should he question him? Get angry at him? Nie Dan had already done all that.

Zhao Zhuo and the Grand Emperor were already dead. This event would shake the entire country when it was revealed at the morning assembly. And what *could* he say when he faced Zhao Chao? The murder had already happened, Zhao Chao had already gone ahead and arranged everything—including the deception of You Miao himself.

You Miao couldn’t help but feel disheartened when he thought of this. What options remained to him after this event? The first option would be what Zhao Chao would most want to see—that You Miao would understand and never again mention the two emperors’ deaths, that he’d pretend nothing had happened and continue to aid Zhao Chao. The second option

would be to question Zhao Chao and express his outrage, and then they'd subsequently go their separate ways. The third option would be to assemble the ministers and tell them the truth...

Taking the third option would definitely enrage Zhao Chao, but what could You Miao even say without any evidence to support his accusations? Nie Dan was probably in the same boat; he had to have guessed it was an inside job when he heard the news. In fact, anyone could see that Zhao Chao had to be involved. But no one would consider it at first, since no one would believe Zhao Chao could be that insane. Even if he did want to kill them, he would have had to take the objectives of entire nation's population of scholars and the Jiangnan gentry into consideration. Furthermore, patricide and fratricide were crimes that would be profoundly reviled by future generations; they would never let Zhao Chao off the hook.

Yet in spite of all this, he'd done it anyway... You Miao sharply sensed danger. If Zhao Chao had dared to commit this crime, then he'd surely prepared for the consequences. Right now, Nie Dan had already entered the palace, but the victims were already dead. Nothing could bring them back to life, so any action that'd anger Zhao Chao would be purely unnecessary.

You Miao could not be rash at a time like this. Maybe the reason Tang Bo had woken him at sigeng time was because he was sure he'd go to the palace. You Miao broke out in a cold sweat. The moment the situation got complicated, he almost stepped into a trap himself.

"Back to the Administration Chamber," You Miao ordered the driver.

The horse carriage turned around to head back. Mentally and physically exhausted, You Miao had no idea what the situation was like right now. Li Zhifeng hadn't sent any letters home, either... The day had broken, and the eastern horizon was paling.

"Hold on," You Miao called out again, "Wait by the side palace. It's almost time for the morning assembly anyway."

Thus, the driver stopped the vehicle. You Miao's head was buzzing when he entered the tearoom for a drink and to wait for the assembly to start. It wasn't yet wugeng time, but the court officials were coming in one after another. Evidently, no one had slept well last night. Everyone had a round of tea, and each house brought their own leaves—some drank Guapian, some drank Yinzhen, some drank Queshe, and some drank Biluochun. As for Ping Xi, Xie Hui, and their group, they drank Riverwave Estate's oolong tea, Beauty's Kiss.

The officials were all silent, each preoccupied with their own thoughts. You Miao nodded at Xie Hui.

Deeply concerned, Xie Hui greeted him, “Lord You is here early.”

You Miao sighed. “I’m not used to the tea served in this tearoom, Lord Xie...”

Understanding, Xie Hui immediately shared his leaves with You Miao. You Miao took a sip of the newly brewed tea, his eyes red from sleep deprivation.

“Why are you here so early today?” Ping Xi suddenly asked.

“Aren’t my lords the same?” You Miao replied coolly.

No one responded to his comment.

You Miao continued, “The Administration Chamber received the news last night. I came right away, but then changed my mind on the way here. I plan on waiting for everyone to go to the morning assembly together.”

The various officials all reacted differently to what he said, and You Miao carefully studied their expressions. He knew there were those who felt outrage and those who felt resigned, but most were sorrowful and worried. They had said many things back then that would probably trigger Zhao Chao’s revenge today, and their whole families might face imminent disaster.

The Minister of Justice said, “Lord You, the Ministry of Justice received news from Lushui Camp at sigeng time that General Nie had been sent there.”

You Miao’s heart violently dropped to the pit of his stomach. Lushui Camp was the imperial prison! Zhao Chao had arrested Nie Dan, just like that?! Thank goodness he himself hadn’t run headlong into that mess of bad luck last night.

The crowd broke into murmurs. Some hadn’t known about the two emperors’ passing, but no one dared to fill them in when they asked about the crimes Nie Dan had ostensibly committed.

After some thought, You Miao said, “Since that’s the case, then will my lords please not act rashly at today’s morning assembly? Everything can wait until General Huwei returns to court. None of us know the whole story, after all; it’s not our place to question His Majesty without it.”

“Indeed,” Xie Hui said languidly. “Lord You, will you please help smooth things over for General Nie?”

You Miao nodded, then looked up and glanced at the crowd. He knew the present officials all shared a sense of sympathy for their own, and he couldn't help but sigh. Just then, the palace's golden gong rang—about a quarter of an hour earlier than usual—and the officials moved to the throne room to attend court.

Zhao Chao's first item at this morning's assembly was to announce the death of the two emperors.

"We had thought it would not be long before We could be relieved of the burden on Our shoulders..." Overcome with grief, Zhao Chao's eyes were bright red, and he continued grimly, "This sudden bad news has Us at a loss on what to do..."

Equally saddened, Li Yan said quietly, "My condolences, Your Majesty. Please take care of your esteemed health."

Every official's expression was very complicated. As they observed Zhao Chao, no one knew what to say at the moment.

Solemn silence mantled the hall, and every eye in the house was red. Lin Zhengtao stepped forward from his position among his rank.

"Your Majesty, pray tell what illness befell the Grand Emperor and the new emperor...? This is a truly a baffling turn of events that is hard to believe..."

Zhao Chao sighed. "Father had long since fallen ill from the strain of the Tartars' torture while in the north, and my brother's health has always been poor. According to the emissaries' report, as the escort was crossing Mount Qi to Qing River, my brother was beside himself with joy at having returned to the homeland. He forced himself to take a stroll by the riverside, where he was bitten by a venomous snake. General Huwei rushed to administer emergency aid, but unfortunately, the venom was extremely vicious; nothing could be done... My brother passed away that evening. My father had been unwell for many years, and upon learning of my brother's death, he coughed blood and passed away in the middle of the night."

A commotion erupted among the officials, and Lin Zhengtao asked, "Your Majesty, how could the escort allow him to go outside? Who was with him at the time? What sort of snake venom was it? And where was he bitten?"

You Miao was a little surprised. He and Lin Zhengtao never saw eye to eye, but the man never spoke at court with selfish motives. And today, he'd actually dared to question Zhao Chao before the whole court, and had said

the words no other officials dared to say. The Censor-in-Chief certainly had bones as tough as iron.

"Currently, nothing is clear," Zhao Chao responded. "We will have to wait for Vice Minister of Justice Xie Quan to return before further questioning can be conducted." He sighed. "Let us end today's morning assembly here..."

"Your Majesty." Unexpectedly, You Miao stepped forward and bowed. He raised his brows at Zhao Chao's changing expression, and said, "This subject has a question."

Everyone, including Zhao Chao, was stricken when You Miao spoke up. But You Miao had thought this through—if he didn't stand up and make his stance known, then he would never have the face to see Nie Dan again. Arguing over who would become the emperor was one thing, but patricide and fratricide—poisoning Zhao Zhuo dead—was a whole different league.

You Miao could tolerate Zhao Chao forcing his brother to abdicate—it would be in the name of self-protection, after all. He also had hopes that Zhao Chao would one day reclaim the Central Plains. However, he drew the line at patricide and fratricide; in fact, he was still trying to convince himself that Zhao Chao wasn't the sort of person who'd do such a thing. He'd held on to that hope throughout the morning assembly, praying Zhao Chao would prove to him that he was who You Miao thought he was.

You Miao turned to Li Yan. "Hanlin Li bore the responsibility of this mission. Why is it that after the treaty was signed, you did not personally go to Da'an to receive the two emperors? It was instead General Huwei and Xie Quan who went, while you remained in the main army force at Mount Qi. For all intents and purposes, it does not make sense."

Li Yan's face dropped, but he composed himself within seconds. "That was the decision His Majesty made after due consideration. Li Zhifeng comes from a Quanrong background; many unnecessary troubles could be avoided if he was the one who went to negotiate with the Tartars. Lord You, do you have any other questions?"

"Since the two emperors were being escorted back, why did you return to the palace ahead of them instead of accompanying them?" You Miao asked coldly.

When this question was posed, everyone at court sharply sensed something beneath the words.

Zhao Chao took over and responded for Li Yan. “We summoned him back.”

“Why summon him back?” You Miao asked.

“We had matters to discuss with him,” Zhao Chao said.

“And what were those matters?”

The tension in the morning assembly suddenly spiked. You Miao was talking back to Zhao Chao, right to his face.

Shaking uncontrollably but managing to hold back his anger, Zhao Chao said with a trembling voice, “You Miao, what are you implying?”

You Miao replied coolly, “This subject simply does not understand why Hanlin Li would return right away. Please forgive me, Your Majesty.”

It was deathly silent at court; one could hear a pin drop. Almost every official was holding their breath. No one had expected You Miao would be so directly confrontational with Zhao Chao at a time like this. It was no doubt You Miao who would benefit the most from the death of the two emperors, and it was no doubt You Miao who would be the last person anyone would expect to question Zhao Chao.

Yet he’d done it, right here and now. Hotblooded and fearless, You Miao had thwarted Zhao Chao—to the astonishment of both the civil and military officials.

When You Miao bowed earlier, he’d already determined Zhao Chao was unquestionably culpable in the matter. There were two good reasons for him to summon Li Yan back early: first, Li Yan needed to be extracted to ensure he was not held accountable after word of the incident got out—or worse, to ensure he was not executed to mollify the people’s fury. Second, Li Yan had no doubt masterminded the assassination plot, and Zhao Chao needed to be notified at once after the deed was done so he could rest easy.

After You Miao regained his calm early that morning, he’d immediately noticed all the dubious details about the situation. This led to the present situation at court, where his questions had stumped Zhao Chao speechless.

No one spoke. All eyes were on Zhao Chao, who sat upon the throne.

Zhao Chao was silent for a long time before he said, at last, “We wanted to have Hanlin Li prepare for the abdication matters; to discuss how to successfully step down and to have the new ruler take over once my brother returned.”

Upon being given this answer, You Miao already did not want to continue his questioning—nor was he allowed to do so. He only nodded and

solemnly replied, “It is no longer possible to hand off the responsibilities on Your Majesty’s shoulders, I’m afraid.”

And then he sighed. In the end, You Miao chose to back down—or at the very least, to not corner Zhao Chao too hard at court. Lin Zhengtao refused to let Zhao Chao off the hook, however.

“Your Majesty, this subject also has a question. If a meeting was to be held to discuss abdication, then it should have involved the Administration Chamber and the Ministry of Rites. Even if an edict was to be drafted, Hanlin Li is not in charge of the Hanlin Academy. So why did he have to return beforehand?”

The question stunned Zhao Chao, and he snapped, “Li Yan knows Our intentions best, so what of it?”

Lin Zhengtao continued, “I simply wonder what sort of crime was committed by Nie Dan—the great marshal general, Defender of the Nation—that would call for him to be thrown into the imperial prison of Lushui Camp?”

Zhao Chao’s expression became severely clouded and stormy.

Oh no! You Miao thought. Not even he was audacious enough to ask that question, and Lin Zhengtao had done it so simply! Everyone was shooting Lin Zhengtao looks, sending him signals, but Lin Zhengtao wasn’t afraid in the slightest.

“A county has its laws, the military has its order,” Lin Zhengtao said coldly. “General Nie has rendered his service without fault, but a commander such as he was locked up on a whim without an edict, without a crime. Any punishments given to officials of the fourth rank or higher are required to be publicly announced, so how does Your Majesty plan on explaining this to the people?”

The situation once again became deadlocked.

Zhao Chao was obviously overcome with rage, and he said frostily, “Nie Dan attempted in vain to assassinate Us! If We did not throw him into the imperial prison, then none of you would have seen Us alive today!”

At such an earth-shattering statement, You Miao almost fainted. Things at this morning’s assembly were developing in a direction that he could not control. What Zhao Chao said had doubtlessly painted Nie Dan as a traitor. If the crime was proven true, then the situation would become inconceivably dreadful not only to Nie Dan, but also to all of Tianqi.

“Your Majesty.” Xie Hui finally stepped forward. “Peace, Your Majesty.”

“Peace, Your Majesty.” The Minister of Justice Lin Luoyang also stepped forward. “General Nie has served the country and the people. He has never used his power for personal gain, which demonstrates his impeccable loyalty. He has no motive whatsoever to attempt an assassination. Perhaps this is only a misunderstanding. This subject advises Your Majesty to summon General Nie to court and interrogate him thoroughly in front of the officials. Since General Nie has been charged with an assassination attempt, proper evidence should be provided to pacify everyone’s minds.”

Zhao Chao was convulsing with anger. This was the first time he had ever encountered a predicament such as this since his enthronement.

“We will of course give you all a justification in due time,” Zhao Chao said. “We stop here today. Assembly dismissed!”

Zhao Chao stood up and left. A deathly silence filled the hall.

As he exited court, all You Miao felt was chaos. The rest of the officials stared at him, and You Miao forced himself to smile and nod back at them.

Solemnly, Xie Hui asked him, “What is the best course of action at present? What is to be done? I wonder, what does Lord You think?”

You Miao looked at the officials surrounding him, and suddenly everything felt a little absurd. They had stood as adversaries once upon a time, but came together when encountering something like this.

Ping Xi spoke up. “The first order of business is to save General Nie’s life. Otherwise, Tianqi will be in grave danger...”

“Have my lords ever considered that this may be a trick played by the Tartars in order to divide us?” Lin Luoyang said.

“That’s possible, as well.” Xie Hui nodded.

The other officials remained silent. You Miao sighed and said, “His Majesty won’t kill General Nie, this I can guarantee.”

Lin Zhengtao sighed. “If he really is going to be executed, then I’ll give my life and the lives of my family to bail him out.”

As they conversed, Li Yan emerged from the side gate wearing a steely, dark expression. He hurried past Wumen Gate without sparing a glance at the officials gathered there and went straight out the palace gates. An indescribable mixed feeling filled You Miao; this time, the relationship between him and Li Yan had truly and completely turned hostile. He never

could've imagined that Li Yan would devise such a vicious scheme for Zhao Chao, and never did he think that Zhao Chao would trust Li Yan.

Maybe everything was as Zhao Chao had said—that he only wanted to extricate You Miao from the whole debacle, and Li Yan just happened to be the scapegoat.

"My lords, let's head back first," You Miao said. "This matter should not be mentioned again. Even if we got to the bottom of this, what would be the point?"

It'd finally been spelled out for everyone to see. What point was there in investigating? Were they going to punish Zhao Chao? The two emperors were already dead. Even if they detained Zhao Chao and convicted him for his crimes, there was no one to replace him. That very fact was the cause of the gloomy clouds of despair that loomed over everyone's heads at the morning assembly. It was not out of a fear that justice could not be upheld, but that upholding it was a vain effort.

There was too much hopelessness in the world. The officials could only sigh and leave the palace.

On the way back to the Administration Chamber, You Miao thought of the way Ping Xi and his group looked at Li Yan. All of a sudden, he recalled what Xie Quan had said at their gathering before he departed for the mission. Ping Xi and the others didn't know the inside story, and they hadn't known what action You Miao was going to take, either.

Immediately, You Miao ordered the carriage to rush to the Ministry of War.

When he arrived, Ping Xi, Lin Luoyang, and Qin Shaonan were in the back hall. You Miao went straight in without having himself be announced. When the three saw him, awkwardness colored their faces.

You Miao didn't get chatty and cut straight to the point. "Back then, when I said I had a plan, it wasn't regicide—it was to have Zhao Zhuo abdicate. I never thought this would be the result."

"You didn't go to the palace last night?" Ping Xi asked. "I heard General Nie and His Majesty got into a fist fight."

Only then did You Miao learn the seriousness of the incident. He shook his head. "No."

Qin Shaonan sighed. "Regicide was Li Yan and Xie Quan's plan from the start. I only started to suspect it after we parted that day."

Now that Qin Shaonan had mentioned it, You Miao immediately thought it was fishy, too. Did that mean Xie Quan was already Li Yan's man? Xie Quan probably couldn't be removed from this incident's suspect list, but what about Li Zhifeng? Did he know? You Miao was now scared after the fact. If Li Zhifeng had also obeyed Zhao Chao's order, then everyone would be implicated.

Ping Xi could tell what You Miao was thinking by his expression, and he consoled him, "Don't think too much. Everything can wait until Li Zhifeng is back."

You Miao could only nod, and exhale a long breath. He told everyone to wait and see how the situation developed, then returned to the Administration Chamber.

That night, You Miao told the others at the Administration Chamber what had happened, but the supervisory secretaries all looked as if it was nothing out of the ordinary. Only Tang Bo thought things were amiss, but he didn't question You Miao further.

The pupils took turns keeping vigil over the next several nights; once the seventh day was over, a funeral procession would take place. They didn't wait longer so as to avoid clashing with the national funeral.

The entire time You Miao kept vigil, he waited for Zhao Chao to come and give him an explanation. He had hypothesized many possibilities, but no matter which of them was true, he still could not accept Zhao Chao's lies and betrayal. Nie Dan had to be even more furious than he was.

Qiao Rong had sought You Miao out at the Administration Chamber the next day. Both her eyes were red. She didn't say anything, but You Miao could tell what was on her mind from just the look of her.

"His life won't be in danger," You Miao said.

"I know. He said so himself," Qiao Rong replied. "The night before last, he told me that he would probably not return once he entered the palace. He also said that he went willingly—that once he's convicted, the officials will all know what happened. I gathered that he doesn't want to be released too quickly, either, so you don't need to plead his case."

You Miao felt incredibly guilty.

Qiao Rong added, "I know none of you have it easy, but please help me send some comforts to the prison—something to eat, something to wear, and maybe some blankets."

"Go back and get things ready, I'll think of something," You Miao said.

You Miao knew Zhao Chao wouldn't kill Nie Dan, but he didn't plan on going to see the general during such a sensitive period. After that morning assembly, everyone had become a target in Zhao Chao's mind and a visit to Nie Dan might rouse Zhao Chao's suspicions. If You Miao sought out Nie Dan, Zhao Chao would know immediately—and his imagination would surely get the better of him as he tried to guess what they were discussing.

Seeing that You Miao wasn't looking so good, Qiao Rong asked after his health. As the two of them had grown up together, You Miao knew she wouldn't sell him out, so he told her everything—and after listening to him, Qiao Rong sighed heavily in resignation.

"I'm a woman. I don't understand any of these state affairs..."

You Miao gave her a smile. "Sometimes, women understand the principles of right and wrong more profoundly than men. I've also admired Li Yan's wife in that way in the past, but I never expected Li Yan himself would fall so low."

"Your sworn older brother has always thought highly of you. Find him and talk things out. He's the open-minded, heroic sort; he won't be petty with you. Relax."

You Miao nodded with a wry smile, and the two of them headed to the main camp of the Imperial Army.

The imperial prison was personally guarded by the Imperial Army, and the commander of the Imperial Army was Tang Hui. You Miao found Tang Hui first, who didn't say much before giving him an identity badge. Considering their friendship, it was needless to discuss who was implicating who.

You Miao brought Qiao Rong into the imperial prison. Inside it was dark and damp with rats scurrying about, and the air was choked with a putrid funk. As they went down the hall, they passed many empty cells. This place used to be where the Yang Prefectural Office detained criminals, but was now the new imperial prison. Although the world hadn't exactly been "peaceful and prosperous" since Zhao Chao came to power, allusions to him in contemporary literature hadn't been overly harsh—for there were practically no prisoners inside the imperial prison. Most of the criminals on death row were instead locked in the Ministry of Justice's prison.

After reaching the end of the long corridor, You Miao suddenly saw a large, slovenly man with disheveled hair sitting in a corner catching fleas. The sight startled him. Were there actually more people locked in here?

“Lord You?” The man was also surprised, and he said with a laugh, “Why’ve you come here?”

You Miao recognized this man to be Tu Risheng; he couldn’t believe he’d actually forgotten about him. Last year he’d been sentenced with “Execution come autumn,” but it had been postponed. You Miao reckoned he’d been behind bars the entire time. Just then, Nie Dan’s voice abruptly came at the end of the corridor.

“Go back. I will not speak to you.”

“Lord Nie,” Qiao Rong called out.

“Miss Qiao?” Nie Dan said in disbelief. “Why have you come?”

Qiao Rong approached the iron bars and passed the clothing she’d prepared through them. With the key given by the warden, You Miao opened the cell door and let Qiao Rong in.

Also setting down the prepared food, Qiao Rong gave Nie Dan a light smile. “I’ve come to accompany Lord Nie in drinking.”

“Ha ha ha.” Nie Dan laughed, then grinned. “Come. Drink.” He gave You Miao, who was leaning against the bars, a measured look. “Come in and drink as well, si-di. Let’s talk only of romance, and nothing of state affairs. Today, da-ge is still your da-ge.”

“I can’t stomach drink today; you two go ahead,” You Miao said, he walked to the start of the hallway to chat with Tu Risheng.

Tu Risheng smiled. “Is that the God of War, General Nie?”

“Yeah.” You Miao laughed. “Was meeting him better than just knowing him by reputation?”

“Indeed.” Tu Risheng chuckled.

“How have things been?” You Miao asked.

Sounding rueful, Tu Risheng replied, “Incredibly boring. I pray only for someone to talk to me. Lord You, you didn’t keep your word.”

You Miao laughed. “How so? I only said I’d save your life, nothing more.”

Tu Risheng huffed in exasperation, and changed the subject. “I’ve been locked up for a year now. Do you think I’ll still have a chance to get out?”

“Just wait,” You Miao said. “Wait for the great mercy granted to the world, and you might have a chance then.”

“Sounds difficult to me,” Tu Risheng said. “How is it out there?”

“Everyone has fields to work and food to eat now,” You Miao answered.

“Hope you’re not lying to me.”

“Why would I come to the imperial prison just to lie to you?”

Tu Risheng thought about it and grinned. “True. They say the current majesty is a wise Son of Heaven. Seeing as how I wasn’t executed, he evidently shows sympathy for the people.”

You Miao sighed and didn’t respond, having suddenly thought of various matters relating to Zhao Chao. Qiao Rong came shortly after.

“You Miao, da-ge is calling you over for a drink,” she said.

You Miao questioned her with his eyes, to which she only inclined her head, gesturing for him to relax. Thus, You Miao stood up and went to Nie Dan’s cell. Nie Dan poured him a cup of liquor.

“Your cousin told me everything,” Nie Dan said. “Have a drink, si-di.”

You Miao used this chance to chide him. “Da-ge, you can’t be so stubborn. The people come first, society second. The ruler is the least important.”

Nie Dan chuckled wryly, and the two threw their heads back and emptied their cups. Nie Dan waved, unable to speak for a moment. The liquor they had was quite strong, and You Miao’s throat burned after drinking his.

You Miao mumbled, “Da-ge. If the Barbarians invade the south in the future, you’ll still need to lead the army in the fight. You can’t sit back and ignore it.”

Nie Dan fell into a contemplative silence before he sighed.

“I had originally planned on spending the rest of my life here.” Nie Dan’s low and powerful voice resounded in the prison. “However, now your da-ge loathes it. Tell me, si-di—do you blame your da-ge for having done you harm when he sought to become your sworn brother back then? Do you think I’ve done harm to er-di and san-di?”

Taken aback, You Miao was at a loss for words. Feeling a lump in his throat, he said, choked up, “Why would I? I’ve never blamed you.”

Nie Dan sighed. “At this point, everything is beyond your control and my own; you needn’t blame yourself anymore. There were even times when things got out of control for Political Advisor Sun, who could anticipate the enemy’s every move like a god and consolidated his every step. A human’s power is finite. The letter you wrote to san-di on the day he ascended the throne was excellent. ‘As a ruler, one must revere the imperial heavens above, respect the ministers in the middle, and fear the common people below.’ He, who has donned yellow and reigns supreme, is not the only one

who must abide by this tenet—you and I, as subjects, must also do the same."

You Miao nodded silently, knowing Nie Dan was trying to provide him counsel. With how things had ended up, Nie Dan and Zhao Chao would inevitably have to cut ties. No one would be sworn brothers with someone who'd murder their fathers and brothers, whether they were the Son of Heaven or a beggar. It had nothing to do with status.

At that moment, You Miao was also starting to feel discouraged.

"Take care, da-ge," You Miao said. "I'm heading back now. I'll come see you another day."

"Do not come see me again," Nie Dan said in a low whisper. "And do not entangle yourself with the other ministers to plead my case. In time, he will certainly ordain a great cleansing of the imperial court—and he will remember these events, these people, without fault. If you want to save yourself and er-di, listen to your da-ge. Do not fight back. Go back home. Bide your time and conserve your strength. A wise man looks after his own hide. The times are no longer yours to influence—remember this at all cost."

Something clicked in You Miao's head. He looked at Nie Dan with a complicated expression, finding it hard to know the right words to say.

[Chapter 57]

After he left the imperial prison, You Miao made a trip to the Imperial Army camp to return the identity badge.

"What did General Nie say?" Tang Hui asked.

"Nothing," You Miao replied. "Only that he doesn't want us to sign a petition to plead his case."

Tang Hui nodded slowly. "He's staying in prison willingly. The longer he stays there, the more difficult it becomes for His Majesty to explain himself to the ministers..." He sighed. "Everyone has their hardships."

You Miao tossed and turned that night, lying awake in bed turning what Zhao Chao had said over in his head. He was disheartened and discouraged, and didn't want to continue like this any longer. When Nie Dan mentioned that ceremony where they swore to be brothers, it reminded You Miao of what life was like in the past—it felt like a whole lifetime ago. That year, he'd lived happy and carefree at the estate, and had become sworn brothers with the heroic and lofty Nie Dan, the easygoing and humorous Zhao Chao, and Li Zhifeng—who had smiled then, for the first time in his life.

But now, it had come to this...

He was still immersed in his memories when he heard a palace attendant speak from outside his door.

"His Majesty requests an audience of you, Lord You."

Mu Feng, who was guarding the door, answered, "My master has gone to rest. He's been ill these past few days and cannot go to the palace."

As the saying goes, the Chancellor's gatekeeper is as powerful as an official of the seventh rank. The palace attendant didn't dare to offend Mu Feng and had no choice but to leave.

After thinking it over and over, You Miao made up his mind—he would resign and leave tomorrow, and go back to the estate to await Li Zhifeng's return. He didn't want to clean up this mess for Zhao Chao anymore. Maybe his departure would also save them both some trouble. Otherwise, if they were to drag out this friction and it ended up the way it did with Nie Dan, it would cause nothing but upset.

Sometimes, when an impulse arose, one would be uncontrollably tempted to make it a reality. The moment the idea of resignation sprouted, not even nine horses could pull it to a stop. The only reason You Miao took

on this heavy mantle from the start was because of his promise to Nie Dan to help build the new government in these trying times. But seeing that Zhao Chao now had his own ideas, You Miao was more than happy to drop out. They all called him a mainstay, but even the God of War who defended the nation could be thrown into jail. And truthfully, things would remain the same no matter who was gone—life had to go on.

As for Li Zhifeng, if he was happy in the army, then he could stick around Yang Prefecture. The treaty with the Tartars was settled and there wouldn't be war for at least three to five years, so Li Zhifeng's position would be an idle one. He absolutely could go home, and the two of them could live their simple little life.

While You Miao's mind continued to churn with thoughts of his estate, You Miao gradually fell asleep. As he wondered how things had been these past few years, his longing for life back at the estate steadily grew. He desperately wanted to put on wings and fly back tomorrow—no, *today*...

Someone was knocking again outside.

This time, Mu Feng didn't say anything, and Zhao Chao's hushed voice came. "You Ziqian, let me in to talk to you."

You Miao was startled awake, his back drenched in cold sweat.

Zhao Chao entered, and You Miao immediately rolled out of bed. He reached out to light the lamp, but Zhao Chao caught his wrist.

"Sit down."

Zhao Chao's voice carried authority, and it made You Miao nervous. If Zhao Chao was going to use force, there was no way You Miao could beat him... Although such a situation had never risen in the past, You Miao had no idea what Zhao Chao wanted to say. Judging by the tone of his voice, he could very well be in a rage right now.

You Miao should've been the bold, unapologetic one, but Zhao Chao's sudden appearance made him shrink a little instead. After carefully considering his options, he said quietly, "Please speak, Your Majesty."

Zhao Chao heaved a sigh. "You're angry, aren't you?"

"This subject doesn't dare say," You Miao replied.

This time, both sides could sense it. Whenever they were alone together in the past, Zhao Chao and You Miao never addressed themselves as ruler and subject; they only called each other directly, using "me" or "you." But now, You Miao no longer had any plans to be his brother.

“Da-ge cut ties with me last night,” Zhao Chao said in a low voice. “I know you are all very disappointed in me.”

“What more is there to say? I will resign and go home tomorrow,” You Miao said.

Zhao Chao’s breath hitched. You Miao knelt on the ground and bowed down slowly, giving him a grand salute.

“Back then, General Nie called Li Zhifeng and I together for the sake of putting the pieces of this broken country back together—for the sake of reviving Tianqi. Even though the north hasn’t been reclaimed yet, the war has already been turned around, and Your Majesty has no use for us anymore. The things that your subject You Ziqian can do are limited, and he does not wish to cause Your Majesty any more worries.”

“You...you...” Zhao Chao breathed heavily. “You Ziqian, you dare...”

You Miao was quiet.

Finally and thoroughly angered, Zhao Chao shouted, “I’ve laid my soul bare to you all these years—I even tried to extricate you from this affair! And this is how you repay me?!”

“What affair?” You Miao replied coldly. “What did I need to be extricated from? If Your Majesty has no use for me, why treat me this way?”

“Who says I have no use for you?” Zhao Chao’s voice was quivering. He’d realized at last that he had gotten himself into deep trouble this time—it wasn’t just Nie Dan who had completely lost faith in him, but even You Miao. He was like a child who had gotten into a mess he couldn’t clean up, and continued to make one mistake after the other.

Finally, Zhao Chao pleaded, “You Ziqian, don’t be like this...”

“The Heavens, the Earth, the ruler, the family, the teacher,” You Miao replied darkly. “I’ve already betrayed my teacher and da-ge to be by your side, like a saddle to a horse. I’ve taken care of everything all this time. When you gave Li Yan those instructions, you already knew what my stance was on the matter. It will be impossible for me to continue serving someone who murdered his own father and brother.”

Zhao Chao was silenced.

“Your Majesty,” You Miao continued. “This subject will resign and retire tomorrow. I am sure Li Yan will be able to serve effectively as Your Majesty’s right arm.”

Zhao Chao snorted. “Fine, very good... Since you’ve said it, then let me tell you something, You Ziqian—you’re asking for it. Don’t think you can just walk away...”

“Why doesn’t Your Majesty throw me and Li Zhifeng in prison, too, then?” You Miao said drily. “That way, none of us will be letting Nie-da-ge down.”

Zhao Chao was so angry he was shaking. He kicked a table over before he threatened in a frosty tone, “Just you wait.”

Then he stalked outside, slamming the door behind him.

After Zhao Chao was gone, You Miao stood up from where he’d kneeled and sat back on the bed, letting out a sigh.

“Laoye,” Mu Feng called from outside the door.

“Mn. It’s nothing,” You Miao answered.

“Why don’t we go back tonight?” Mu Feng suggested.

“It’s fine,” You Miao comforted him. “He won’t do anything to me.”

Despite what Zhao Chao said, You Miao knew he would never throw him in prison, lest he incur Li Zhifeng’s wrath. You Miao, Nie Dan, and the attitude of every court official had backed Zhao Chao into an isolated corner.

A ruler needed discipline. Maybe when Zhao Chao first made the decision to have Li Yan murder the two emperors, he had already considered how vehemently the court would oppose it—yet he went through with it nonetheless. And since he had committed the act, he would have to face the consequences of his actions.

There was no way You Miao would shield him this time. In retrospect, You Miao only had himself to blame—he had always shielded Zhao Chao, always helped him deliberate and shut down any potential unforeseen issues over the years. Today, he would let Zhao Chao take responsibility for himself.

Unable to sleep anymore after Zhao Chao left, You Miao went to Sun Yu’s study and composed his resignation memorial to the throne. At daybreak, Mu Feng brought several boy servants from Moyan Pavilion to pack all the books Sun Yu had left You Miao into the carriage, which would deliver them to Riverwave Estate.

As Tang Bo entered the Administration Chamber accompanied by the morning bell, he saw You Miao waiting in the courtyard.

“Tang-xiong,” You Miao greeted, handing him his memorial to the throne. “Will you please present this to His Majesty at this morning’s assembly?”

When Tang Bo opened the memorial and skimmed its contents, his expression stirred. He looked up at You Miao, unable to tell what he was planning.

“Mister Sun’s mourning period has yet to pass,” Tang Bo started, “Why not wait until it’s over before leaving?”

“I will return on the sixth day and attend Mister Sun’s funeral,” You Miao answered.

Tang Bo sighed. “I heard General Li has already returned to Yang Prefecture to pall bear.”

You Miao was contemplative for a moment before he slowly nodded.

“What will happen to the Administration Chamber if you’re gone?” Tang Bo asked.

“Tang-xiong can direct the Administration Chamber,” You Miao said. “As for everything else, I’m sure His Majesty already knows what to do.”

“Nothing has been announced yet regarding the Political Advisor position,” Tang Bo pointed out.

“In Mister Sun’s will, he said that position can either be left vacant or given to Minister Xie,” You Miao replied.

Tang Bo paused, then narrowed his eyes as he nodded hesitantly. You Miao knew that after Sun Yu’s passing, Zhao Chao must have allowed whispers to fly; since he wanted to forget the will, he had to test the waters with the officials and see what they thought first. That might be a contributing reason why Tang Bo had heard conflicting information.

“General Nie is imprisoned, Lord You is retiring...”

“Tu Risheng can coordinate with General Tang and take command of the army,” You Miao said. “That man can manage a peasant army of one hundred thousand, which goes to show he is capable. Tang Hui also recommended him before, but he was left neglected due to His Majesty’s ill feelings toward him.”

Tang Bo grunted in answer. You Miao made a “please” hand gesture, so Tang Bo cupped his hands at You Miao in a salute.

“Take care, Lord You.”

You Miao responded with a smile. The world was as ever-changing as the clouds, and as the morning slowly dawned, he suddenly felt light.

He sipped on tea while he waited in the inner courtyard of the Administration Chamber, sitting beside Sun Yu's funeral shed. If Sun Yu was still alive, would he have also taken the same action he did? With Sun Yu's temper, he would've either ended up in prison, or resigned and retired—You Miao was only doing on his behalf what the man hadn't had the time to do himself.

"Laoye!"

The morning assembly hadn't even ended yet, and Cheng Guangwu was charging into the Administration Chamber looking panicked.

"Our general got thrown into prison!"

Shocked, You Miao frowned deeply. "*What*?!"

Zhao Chao actually did it! It was You Hange who had heard whispers of the news through the grapevine at the Ministry of Revenue, and had rushed to tell Cheng Guangwu at Moyan Pavilion.

Before Cheng Guangwu could say anything more, however, someone else had gotten out of a carriage outside and entered in a whirlwind.

Ping Xi yelled, "Your Miao! What were you thinking?!"

You Miao immediately gestured for Ping Xi to relax, then questioned him in disbelief, "I should be the one asking you! What were you guys thinking, throwing Li Zhifeng in prison just like that? Did none of you plead for mercy? Where's the Yang Prefectural Army?"

"The Yang Prefectural Army is split in two. Half is defending the frontlines, and the other half is waiting outside the city," Ping Xi explained. "All news is locked down right now, but word will leak before the night comes. The whole Ministry of War already knows! Nie Dan was taken into custody and now Li Zhifeng is detained at the Ministry of Justice—if the army outside the city finds out, they will definitely mutiny!"

You Miao was overwhelmed; he had never thought Zhao Chao would do something so insane.

"An order was issued to lock down the city gates," Ping Xi continued. "General Tang thinks that's ill-advised and told me to ask for your opinion. Why don't you come with me to pacify Li Zhifeng's troops outside the city?"

"Hold on, let me think about this first... What did he charge Li Zhifeng with in order to send him to jail?" You Miao questioned.

Ping Xi said, "Poor supervision, which led to the death of the two emperors..."

You Miao snorted. “So he’s thinking of pushing the blame on Li Zhifeng?”

“No court officials accepted this as the reason, and they’re demanding the coffins be opened for inspection,” Ping Xi said. “The morning assembly hasn’t been dismissed yet; no one is letting His Majesty leave, and Xie Quan got thrown into prison too. I snuck out, but you have to give me a plan of action right now.”

You Miao raised his eyes to stare at Ping Xi. “What kind of plan are you looking for?”

“What about General Nie?” Ping Xi suggested. “Right now, the only way is to make contact with him and Li Zhifeng. Tang Bo told me to find you and have the Administration Chamber issue an edict.”

“And then what?” You Miao questioned darkly.

Ping Xi looked back at You Miao and fell silent. They both already knew. The court officials wanted to hold Zhao Chao accountable—everyone had turned on him, and there was no longer a point in continuing being emperor. Even Ping Xi’s group had joined Tang Bo’s camp; now all they needed was an edict from the Administration Chamber to release Nie Dan and Li Zhifeng. And after that, the Yang Prefectural Army outside the city would enter and start a mutiny.

“You forgot someone,” You Miao said. “Did you think Tang Hui’s Imperial Army is a pushover?”

“You’re the one who saved Tang Hui, he’ll listen to you,” Ping Xi said.

You Miao took a step forward and hissed darkly next to Ping Xi’s ear, “And what if he doesn’t? I know what you all want—you think if you open the city gates and let the Yang Prefectural Army in, they’ll listen to Nie Dan’s command. But when the clash starts with the Imperial Army, what happens to the people of the city? Are you trying to force a remonstration or a dethronement? Dethronement’s easy, but who will be enthroned?”

“Prince Ying, Zhao He,” Tang Bo answered as he returned from court. He said to You Miao and Ping Xi, “Mister Sun, General Nie, and Minister Xie had thought of appointing Prince Ying as the emperor. He is still in Yi Prefecture as we speak. We just need to send an expedited message and have General Li escort him back, and things will proceed smoothly.”

“And on what charges will you invoke the dethronement?!” You Miao flew into a rage. “Without evidence, how will you shut the people’s mouths?”

Tang Bo frowned. “No evidence? All the officials are evidence enough! Don’t say there’s no evidence; anyone could dig some up if they really wanted to! There’s no one at court who will acknowledge him now! You Ziqian! You best think this through!”

“Oh? You want to forge evidence and announce it to the world?” You Miao countered.

Ping Xi and Tang Bo fell silent, and You Miao rebuked them, “Don’t expect me to issue an edict without evidence. If we’re charging the Son of Heaven with patricide, you’d best produce some proof first. Besides, I already resigned today. If Tang-xiong has everything already planned, then go ahead.”

But Tang Bo didn’t dare to rashly make the decision. The three were stuck at a standstill, and no one spoke.

Moments later, another person arrived. This time, it was Qin Shaonan.

“His Majesty has approved the corpse inspection,” he said. “What do we do now?”

You Miao couldn’t help but laugh. “Every single one of you—what are you doing, running here to my Administration Chamber? Go back to the palace.”

Ping Xi really couldn’t deal with You Miao anymore. “What kind of situation do you think we’re in right now? And you’re laughing?!”

“Lord You, I’ve brought back your memorial to the throne,” Tang Bo said quietly. “Not only did His Majesty reject your resignation, none of the court officials allowed it either.” He dug out You Miao’s resignation memorial and handed it back. “Minister Ping and I will go back to the palace at once to learn the results of the corpse inspection. Don’t forget what you promised. At the very least, the edict must be issued before you can leave.”

You Miao drew in a deep breath, then replied tiredly, “I understand. Go on, then. Go back.”

Qin Shaonan suddenly spoke up. “You Ziqian. I have something to ask.”

You Miao didn’t say anything. Ping Xi and Tang Bo were just about to leave, but they stopped when they heard Qin Shaonan.

Qin Shaonan said, “Tell the truth. On the grounds that we’ve been friends for so many years, tell me the truth. Is this whole thing a coincidence, or was it planned?”

"I'll give you the truth," You Miao replied. "I once came up with a plan of action for this turn of events. I should've been the one to go on that diplomatic mission so I could persuade Zhao Zhuo to abdicate. But out of nowhere, Li Yan was given the mission halfway through the planning stage. And this is what happened."

"So he really did order Li Yan to do it?" Tang Bo questioned.

"I don't know," You Miao answered truthfully. He continued, muttering, "But judging by my understanding of his character, as well as his reaction to General Nie confronting him and his visit to the Administration Chamber last night, murder would not have been his intention. All of you have been so arbitrary in your decisions—what if the truth really is as the reports say? Would Li Zhifeng not have noticed? Who can judge if it was genuinely an act of the Heavens?"

You Miao looked the others in the eyes. "Do as you please, my lords."

Zhao Chao, this is the last thing I'll do to help you, You Miao thought. *There is one reason and one reason alone why I'm still safeguarding your path—you saved my life, once at Yanbian and once at Lan Pass.*

* * *

After Tang Bo left, You Miao didn't bother going to the Ministry of Justice anymore—it wasn't like anyone would dare touch Li Zhifeng while he was in prison anyway. The current situation with the military was more dire; he would have to pacify the Yang Prefectural Army first. After thinking it over, You Miao called Cheng Guangwu over and told him to make an urgent trip out of the city to retrieve an item from the estate, and to look for any notable activity within the city while he was at it. You Miao gave him his official's seal so the city gates would open for him, and he then waited at the Administration Chamber.

At noon, Tang Bo returned looking ashen.

"How as the corpse inspection?" You Miao asked.

"No different from what was reported," Tang Bo replied.

Expressing no thoughts after that, Tang Bo went back into the main hall of the Administration Chamber. You Miao knew that this meant the near-mutiny had at last been quelled.

Perhaps the ministers also knew that nothing would be discovered during the corpse inspection, which was why the events from earlier had

taken place. But the prime opportunity had come and gone; no one would be able to overthrow Zhao Chao without any evidence. What had transpired that morning was a terrifying ordeal in retrospect; if a child was installed as the emperor, the imperial court would no doubt turn into another clash of the clans as everyone fought for their own advantage—resulting in another bloody storm once certain officials took power.

You Miao changed his robes and went to kneel before Sun Yu's funeral shed.

"Sir, I've done all that I should—and all that I shouldn't, too," You Miao said. "You have already left this world; there is no one left to scold or guide me, and my actions can only stem from my own conscience... Everything else must depend on what fate has in store for this country."

Murmuring to himself, he concluded, "I can only seek to ensure that I don't do anything I might regret."

With full respect, You Miao kowtowed three times and exited the Administration Chamber alongside Cheng Guangwu, who had returned with a case in hand.

"Lord You." Tang Bo ran after You Miao as he was leaving. "Lord You, where are you going?"

"To the palace," You Miao said, "to tender my resignation personally."

"With the present situation as it is, any action could trigger a domino effect," Tang Bo said. "I advise Lord You to stay for now and see how things develop in the future. The Yang Prefectural Army of twenty thousand men are still waiting outside the city. Today's events have yet to conclude."

You Miao waved dismissively. "The issue with the army will be resolved tonight at the latest. There's no need to worry."

Watching as You Miao left, Tang Bo was filled with mixed emotions; feeling quite torn. You Miao, however, was confident—he already had everything planned out. He had Cheng Guangwu drive to the back gates of the palace, passing right by the Ministry of Justice's front entrance, and told the guards to announce his arrival. It didn't take long before a palace attendant came to retrieve him.

To the attendant's surprise, You Miao stopped at the imperial garden and handed him a wooden case.

"Give this to His Majesty for me, I'm not going in," You Miao said.

"His Majesty is alone in the imperial study and requests Lord You's audience," the attendant replied.

“I refuse to attend. Just do as I say.”

Without a choice, the attendant took the case and the memorial to the throne and delivered them to the imperial study.

Tossing the memorial aside, Zhao Chao responded tiredly, “Tell him to come in. We guarantee We will not give him any difficulties. We just have matters to discuss with him.”

As the attendant bowed and was about to leave, Zhao Chao called again, “Wait.”

He opened the wooden case You Miao gave him. Inside was a flannel cloth, and inside the cloth was a molar tooth.

Zhao Chao was quiet for a very long time, and sat frigid like a sculpture upon the throne. As the sun slowly sank in the west, the rays of dusk that filtered into the imperial study were shattered into small pieces by the window lattice.

Meanwhile, You Miao had been gazing at the imperial garden, sitting on a railing. At last, when the sky darkened, the palace attendant came back with an edict for him.

“His Majesty has instructed that, when Lord You is finished with his business, to please come back to the palace with General Li without fail. His Majesty has matters to discuss,” the attendant said.

“Sure,” You Miao responded absently as he took the edict, then left for the Ministry of Justice.

It was still very bright inside the Ministry of Justice, and as soon as You Miao entered, the Vice Minister immediately came out to receive him.

“Lord You.”

Everyone knew he was coming, so You Miao didn’t bother with chitchat and cut straight to the point. “Where’s Li Zhifeng?”

“Inside the inner courtyard, drinking with the Lord Minister.”

Asshole. Here I am working myself to death, and you’re drinking with Lin Luoyang, You Miao thought, wanting nothing more than to punch Li Zhifeng when he saw him. But when he actually did see him after rounding the corner of a long corridor, he felt his heart swell and a lump form in his throat. A thousand words swarmed his chest, yet he found himself unable to speak a single one of them no matter how hard he tried.

He looked the same as he had when he’d left. Li Zhifeng sat at the stone table in the Ministry of Justice’s garden, dressed in armor. One hand was settled on his knee, and the other was holding a winecup.

At the sound of footsteps, he said to his company, “He’s here. I’m off.”

You Miao’s eyes reddened. Without a care for the eyes of others, he rushed over and hurled himself into Li Zhifeng’s embrace. The moon illuminated the world for a thousand miles around, spilling its light over these two souls who held each other tight. They didn’t speak, as though the hug had already said it all.

Lin Luoyang had risen to his feet to send Li Zhifeng off, but now he was left standing there feeling nothing but awkward. It wouldn’t be right if he spoke and spoiled the mood, but it also wouldn’t be suitable to remain silent.

You Miao kept his head buried in Li Zhifeng’s shoulder for a long time. At last, he drew in a trembling breath. He tossed the edict in his hand to Lin Luoyang and said, “I’m taking him with me.”

Lin Luoyang nodded. “Please forgive me for any discourtesy, General.”

Holding You Miao’s hand, Li Zhifeng nodded and left the Ministry of Justice. As they walked, You Miao couldn’t help but pick up his large hand and raise it to his nose to inhale the familiar scent of his skin. After a long expedition—a separation of over a year—he had finally come home to him.

They had only just left the complex when Li Zhifeng pulled him into his arms again, locking him in a deadly hold. “I missed you so much,” he breathed.

You Miao returned the hug with equal fervor, kneading his hands into Li Zhifeng’s back. He tugged off and tossed aside Li Zhifeng’s helmet, and then kissed down his neck before he rubbed his face against his nape. Li Zhifeng was covered in sweat, but the smell only made You Miao feel infinitely relaxed and safe.

“Let’s go meet lao-san first. I’ve got questions for him,” Li Zhifeng said.

“There’s nothing to ask,” You Miao said coldly. “I’ve completely lost faith in him.”

Li Zhifeng quirked his lips. “You’re mad at him?”

The sequence of events returned to You Miao’s mind, but he didn’t want to discuss anything now that his long wait had finally been rewarded with Li Zhifeng’s return—at the very least, he wanted to shove everything aside for a few days.

“Let’s not talk about state affairs; let’s go home and settle in first. I really don’t want to clean up this mess for him for another minute...

Mmm...”

As You Miao talked, Li Zhifeng bore down with a kiss and tangled with his hot tongue. He kissed You Miao so hard that You Miao practically wanted to strip him out of his gear and do it right there in the open streets.

But just as he was trying to hurry home, a carriage stopped in front of the Ministry of Justice. The carriage’s curtain was peeled back, and Zhao Chao’s voice came from inside.

“Get in.”

“Good timing. I’ve got questions for you,” Li Zhifeng said.

Zhao Chao replied irritably, “And I’ll give you an explanation. Get in first.”

You Miao sighed. He hadn’t expected Zhao Chao to pursue them this hard. Nonetheless, he climbed into the car with Li Zhifeng—since Zhao Chao had agreed to his resignation and had also set Li Zhifeng free, there should be no further changes of plans.

Once inside the carriage, You Miao demanded, “What do you have to say?”

“I want to show you something,” Zhao Chao replied in a low voice. “You’ll understand once we’re there.”

What terrible thing did Zhao Chao want to show him at this hour? You Miao was immediately on guard. Zhao Chao wasn’t going to trick them and throw them into the imperial prison, was he? Though that shouldn’t be the case—if Zhao Chao planned on harming him in any way, there was no sense for him to have waited until Li Zhifeng was around; he should’ve apprehended You Miao back at the imperial garden.

Li Zhifeng shot You Miao a questioning look, but You Miao responded with an imperceptible shake of his head—telling him not to make any reckless moves.

Zhao Chao’s carriage took them to the palace. After they alighted, he went straight for the funeral hall, instructing the staff as he went in, “Guard the area. Do not let anyone inside.”

You Miao and Li Zhifeng followed him inside. You Miao’s heart was pounding in his chest.

With a low, deathly calm voice, Zhao Chao said to Li Zhifeng, “Er-ge, help me open the coffin...”

It was dim inside the funeral hall, and the low lighting reflected their three shadows onto the gauze curtains. When an eerie, haunting breeze

passed through the chamber, You Miao broke out in a cold sweat.

They lifted the lid of the first coffin, and inside it lay the Grand Emperor Zhao Mao. Zhao Mao had been stuck in the north for many years, and he had become wizened beyond recognition. His hands were covered in scars. In his mouth there was a luminous pearl, and on his forehead was a piece of jade. He had likely developed asthma, as he showed signs of having been coughing violently right before his death—when a person died from an inability to properly breathe, their face often turned a horrifying blackish-blue hue.

What was Zhao Chao trying to prove? That he didn't kill his father? You Miao's mind was spinning. But judging from his appearance, Zhao Mao certainly did die from illness.

They subsequently lifted the lid of the second coffin. Inside, Zhao Zhuo's corpse was veiled by a white cloth, revealing only the feet—which were covered in injuries both new and old. One ankle was swollen, and had visible snake bite marks. You Miao could tell that ankle had once been broken; obviously due to torture at the hands of the Tartars. But none of that meant anything—it only showed that Zhao Zhuo was bitten by a snake before he died. Assassination had still not been ruled out.

"Fine." You Miao conceded. "I'll believe you didn't arrange this."

"That's not what I wanted to say," Zhao Chao said glumly.

Then he peeled back the white cloth, revealing Zhao Zhuo's face. You Miao was dumbstruck by what he saw.

Zhao Chao asked Li Zhifeng, "Are you certain this is the person you brought back?"

Li Zhifeng nodded with a frown, and You Miao was completely dumbfounded—Zhao Zhuo had been swapped out! This was not the corpse of Zhao Zhuo!

Despite the distortion that naturally accompanied death—the frosty countenance, the bulging eyes, the muscle contortion from the pain of the snake venom—it was clear to anyone examining the corpse's face, skin color, features...none of it belonged to Zhao Zhuo!

Who had swapped out Zhao Zhuo? And then an even more terrifying question struck You Miao—where had the real Zhao Zhuo gone?

"No way. How did this happen?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng was confused. "What's wrong?"

Zhao Chao closed the coffin. “This man isn’t my brother. Are you certain that the Tartars handed *him* over? Think back carefully. At what point did you first come in contact with him?

Li Zhifeng replied, “Your edict told me not to question the matter, so Xie Quan handled everything. I never saw the two emperors while at the Tartar camp.”

“Xie Quan said my father returned in a carriage with my brother,” Zhao Chao said. “Did they see each other’s faces at all on the way back?”

“How could they have not? They were together every day in the same carriage,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao was having trouble processing all this information. “Wait a minute, this is too...”

The three fell silent inside the funeral hall. It only took You Miao a brief moment to figure out the inside plot, and he couldn’t help but feel waves of chills down his spine.

“Your father planned this,” he declared.

Zhao Chao nodded. “At first, I also suspected the Tartars might have detained my brother and sent a complete stranger to impersonate Zhao Zhuo. But that would’ve been easily found out; he would’ve been exposed the moment he returned. Hemetir wouldn’t do something that stupid. As er-ge said, my father and this fraud spent every day together in the carriage. This must’ve been their own plot.”

You Miao drew in a deep breath. “Right. He...had guessed everything.”

“Even with all my calculations, I’m still a step behind. Maybe this was meant to be,” Zhao Chao said dejectedly. “Li Zhifeng and Xie Quan never met my brother before; they wouldn’t have recognized him. Sending the two of them to pick them up was the biggest blunder. Had you or Li Yan been there personally, things would’ve gone smoother.”

You Miao shook his head. “Not necessarily. Since your father decided to deceive you, he must’ve made careful arrangements. He could’ve gotten Zhao Zhuo to fake an illness and not allow anyone near enough to see him. That would’ve deceived everyone.”

“On the journey back, they did indeed pretend to be sick. They told the army that they had caught colds,” Zhao Chao said. “I won’t lie to you anymore. It’s true that Li Yan had Xie Quan do it. Now Xie Quan is the one sitting in prison on charges of poor supervision.”

“Who else knows about this?” You Miao asked.

"You, me, er-ge, Li Yan," Zhao Chao replied.

No wonder Zhao Zhuo had been veiled with a white cloth when they opened the coffin. You Miao understood now—Li Yan had obviously already predicted the officials would demand a corpse inspection, so he tampered with it ahead of time.

"It couldn't have been Li Yan who made the switch; the timing doesn't match," You Miao said.

"That, and he had no need to do so," Zhao Chao said. "I didn't even trust Li Yan with the task; I ordered Xie Quan to do it."

"You told him to let a venomous snake loose in the carriage?" Li Zhifeng asked.

Zhao Chao nodded.

"And your father?"

"Xie Quan did that. He strangled him to death," Zhao Chao answered. "He was very calm before his death; he knew it was inescapable."

Li Zhifeng stared at him with a complicated look, then declared, "You're bad."

"Yes." Zhao Chao nodded. "You all think I've committed the most heinous of crimes; one intolerable to the heavens. But have any of you considered who would bear the worst blame if any mishaps occurred in the transport process?"

Zhao Chao's breaths were coming quick and harsh. "I know everyone wants to protect me—including you and You Miao. You all want everything to be perfect. But is anything perfect in this world? Could you have guaranteed that my brother wouldn't do anything to me once he abdicated?"

Pah! The sound was clear and crisp. You Miao had mercilessly slapped Zhao Chao across the face.

"So what?!" You Miao exclaimed sharply. "Just because nothing could be perfectly planned, you decided to remove all doubt from the equation? To go as far as killing your own father and brother?! If anyone plots against you in the future, are you going to condemn all nine branches of their clan to death in order to avoid a coup? Where has your courage gone?!

"It's true that there are no perfect plans in the world, but there are ways to respond to setbacks," You Miao continued coldly. "When Nie-da-ge fought in the war, was there ever a perfect plan? I devised a myriad of ways to fight for you, but were any of them perfect? If you're not willing to take risks, how will you achieve greatness and stabilize this country? If

everything had to wait for the *perfect plan*, who knows what your government—your country—would've become by now!

"A man of valor can take responsibility, and that includes responsibility for all the consequences and changes that occur. Only cowards are overcautious, apprehensive, or too scared to face danger. Back when you led the army against Goryeo, you still had courage. But now, after only a few years of being emperor, you spend every day worried about people coveting your throne. Who knows where you ditched your spine."

You Miao was so angry he was shaking as he stared at Zhao Chao.

"Yes, you're right." Zhao Chao nodded. "I'm indeed a coward. I'm scared. I've never felt confident. My seat upon the throne didn't come legitimately, so I'm constantly scared that someone's out to get me, to overthrow me... It is what it is."

He leaned back against the coffin and slumped on the floor.

Li Zhifeng was at a loss for words, and after a long silence, he said, "You Miao is right. You worry too much about too many things, and lost the courage you once had."

Zhao Chao choked up. "I can't resign myself to the situation. You're both able to face it with an open mind; da-ge is, too. And eventually when everything's over and done with, you'll all leave... But I can't just let go..."

You Miao's heart softened again as he listened to Zhao Chao. The slap he gave him earlier still stung in his hand. *What a hard-headed guy*, You Miao thought. In the past five thousand years of history, he was probably the only subject who'd ever dared to slap an emperor. Discounting, of course, the Tartar dogs who'd imprisoned two emperors in the north and slapped them a thousand times in their army camps...

You Miao thought for a moment, then exchanged a look with Li Zhifeng. In a calm tone, he said, "The perp is likely a guard. His hands are familiar with gripping a blade. A key question is, among those close to Zhao Zhuo, was anyone else swapped out during the trip? In other words—of the guards that should've returned with Zhao Zhuo, has anyone gone missing since the escort's arrival in Jiangnan?"

The question quickly jarred something in Zhao Chao's memory, and he said, "When the escort reached Mount Qi, Li Yan did a secret check. The troop was formed after the peace talks, and the men were all prisoners of war who used to be ragtag soldiers in the Northern Army. The men didn't know each other, and they didn't know my father or brother. That's why my

brother was able to swap identities with one of the guards. There wasn't a register, and when Xie Quan took over their command, he didn't do a roll call, either..."

Li Zhifeng nodded. "The Northern Expedition Army took over at Mount Qi. On the road, your father decreed that anyone who wanted to go home could be given twenty silver and take their leave, so quite a number left along the way. Only the few who had nowhere to go continued to follow and returned to the capital with us."

"How many left along the way? Can we interrogate them one by one?" You Miao asked.

Looking ashen, Zhao Chao said, "The court officials were appeased when the coffins were opened for the corpse inspection earlier this afternoon. I used the cause of death as the reason to interrogate the remaining soldiers, but there weren't many of them—most had gone home as they crossed the Central Plains... After all, it's perfectly reasonable that they'd want to search for their families now that they're back, instead of coming down to Jiangnan."

"Li Zhifeng can't be blamed for that. Your father personally issued the decree; no one could've disobeyed," You Miao said.

Zhao Chao nodded. "I don't blame him. No one can be blamed for this except me."

Zhao Zhuo's escape had made matters worse; You Miao was still trying to deduce where he might have gone. Zhao Chao's move had been ruthless, but the old emperor was even more so. But on the bright side, Zhao Chao could now be cleared of the crime of fratricide. Although Zhao Chao had intended to kill Zhao Zhuo, he ultimately did not die, which technically meant You Miao's original plan had succeeded. It would not be too awful a conclusion if Zhao Zhuo truly had taken the twenty silver and gone on the run to wander the world and live his own life—except for the fact that Zhao Chao would never relax again, and would probably lose sleep and his appetite to boot.

Among the other potential negatives, what if Zhao Zhuo came back to fight Zhao Chao for the throne? That'd be even more troublesome—anyone could become an enemy. You Miao feared that Zhao Zhuo was simply lying low, and would resurface when he was fully prepared to deal Zhao Chao a decisive blow.

The more You Miao thought about this, the more his head hurt. In the end, he said, “Since he ran away, he ran away. Open an investigation to see if there’s anything to be found, if not...then...”

Zhao Chao nodded.

You Miao was completely exasperated at this point. *Wouldn’t it have been so much better if you’d just let me handle this case from the start? This problem would never have happened, everyone could’ve gone home happy, and wouldn’t that have just been grand? You just* had *to trust Li Yan, and make a mess of things. Now no one can clean this up. Let’s just pray Zhao Zhuo is sensible enough to refrain from coming back to cause trouble in a few days.*

“Is there anything else you want to discuss with us?” Li Zhifeng asked.

Zhao Chao replied tiredly, “No. Go home and live your lives.”

“Remember what you promised me,” Li Zhifeng said.

Sitting there against the coffin, Zhao Chao closed his eyes. Just as Li Zhifeng and You Miao were leaving the funeral hall, however, he said, “If my seat on the throne is secure, I will remember.”

You Miao couldn’t help but feel his heart clench at this, and almost turned back a few times to console him. But now that Li Zhifeng was around, his charms were far greater than Zhao Chao’s junk of a government. At last, You Miao hardened himself and left with Li Zhifeng.

[Chapter 58]

Sharing one horse beneath the moonlight, they sprinted across hills and fields of rapeseed flowers amidst the breeze of late spring. Li Zhifeng howled like a wolf a few times. Leaning in his arms, You Miao almost fell asleep.

"Did you know he was going to do this?" You Miao asked.

"I guessed, but I never asked about it," Li Zhifeng replied. "He begged me in a letter to not care about anything Xie Quan might do, and that he'd give me an explanation after I returned. That was the last thing I agreed to."

"Oh?" You Miao was surprised. "And how many things have you guys agreed on?"

"Three. One, that I would command the army and rally Jiangnan. Two, that I would defeat Hemetir. And three, that I would help him resolve the matter at the northern frontier," Li Zhifeng said.

"When did he say that he'll lend you the army?"

"Within ten years," Li Zhifeng replied. "If I'm not wrong, my brother will be coming down south soon as well. When that happens, lao-san will have reason to lend me the army and I'll lead a campaign north to fight my brother."

"War again," You Miao protested tiredly. Whenever he heard that word now, it irritated him.

Li Zhifeng chuckled, however. "I do wish my brother would hurry up, though. After that battle, I won't ever have to fight again."

"Nie-da-ge is still in prison, eh," You Miao said. "Who knows what'll happen next."

"Let him be. He knows what he's doing," Li Zhifeng said.

After going through so much, You Miao suddenly felt a lot more easy-going about everything. The estate stood before them, looking exactly the same as before, with only a few minor changes.

This time, Qiao Jue didn't rush out to welcome them home. He had gone to Yi Prefecture with a large sum of money to do some business there, and to purchase some cosmetics to sell in Jiangnan. Commerce ranked last of the four classes, below scholarship, agriculture, and artisanry; more than once, You Miao had wanted to arrange a government position for Qiao Jue. But Qiao Jue simply loved doing business. There were those in the world

who loved being an official, and naturally, there were those who loved doing business. It couldn't be helped.

Since Cheng Guangwu had already informed the boy servants of their arrival, everything was already tidied and in order when You Miao and Li Zhifeng got home. As soon as they entered the door, the servants began to prepare baths and night refreshments. Everyone the two encountered in the corridors simply greeted them with a "welcome home, shaoye," and let them be. Life was exceedingly easy and relaxed.

That night, You Miao took a bath with Li Zhifeng in the wooden tub and stopped caring about anything else. More scars had appeared on Li Zhifeng's body, but they were from light injuries. Draped over his shoulder, You Miao's fingers brushed across that powerful back and down his beautiful waistline.

"Why do you have so many injuries?" he asked quietly.

Li Zhifeng was sitting cross-legged inside the tub. "How do you avoid getting hurt in war?" he replied nonchalantly. "These small injuries are nothing, considering."

You Miao's hand traveled down the curves and, upon reaching Li Zhifeng's thighs, he grabbed the erection between them. Using his thumb to press and rub the tip, he murmured, "It makes my heart ache."

"You've lost so much weight," Li Zhifeng whispered next to his ear, sounding aroused. "My heart aches more."

They breathed in a hot, shared breath and entwined their tongues to seal each other's mouths. Li Zhifeng held You Miao's waist while his other hand moved lower and slipped below his hips, pushing deep into that opening. In one fast motion, he engulfed him in a forceful embrace and drove inside like a ferocious beast. His mouth agape, You Miao gasped and his vision blurred as Li Zhifeng seized his lips and nailed him against the tub, hammering inside again and again. The violent thrusts built an overwhelming desire that crushed all of You Miao's reason.

He didn't know when he came, and he'd lost count of how many times Li Zhifeng had thrust in and out like a ravenous wolf. Even after they were both sated, You Miao was still dropping enamored kisses on Li Zhifeng's muscular shoulder while Li Zhifeng gently nuzzled the tips of You Miao's ears like a wolf who knew not of fatigue.

The bathwater had cooled, but the satiny feel of their bodies rubbing together had made You Miao reluctant to move, so Li Zhifeng carried him

out and wrapped his naked body in a dry towel. Just as how he had served him in the past, Li Zhifeng toweled him down from head to toe, dried his hair, and helped dress him in his inner robes before he dressed himself.

"Wait." A smile suddenly appeared on You Miao's face. "Let *me* serve you tonight."

With an "okay," Li Zhifeng sat down at the edge of the bed and watched You Miao with amusement. Without batting an eye, You Miao tied a black ribbon around Li Zhifeng's eyes, covering his vision. Li Zhifeng's sharp eyebrows shot up, his expression stirring.

"What are you doing?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"What do you think?" You Miao asked with a wide grin.

"You want to do me?" Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao laughed aloud and hugged him. He pecked a kiss to his lean cheek and licked his fine lips. When he looked down, Li Zhifeng's nearly foot-long thing was still standing erect between his robust legs; as powerful as those of handsome steeds. You Miao's mind hadn't gone there until Li Zhifeng asked him the question, but now he couldn't help but ask, "If I wanted to do you, would you let me?"

"Yes," Li Zhifeng replied. "You can do anything you want to me."

You Miao was struck by the urge to strip once more, straddle his lap, and give himself to Li Zhifeng to fuck the entire night. Alas, there was more important business at hand.

Smiling, he said, "Maybe next time. Let's just be intimate for a bit."

He drew back Li Zhifeng's damp hair and toweled his entire body dry, dropping kisses as he did so. It didn't take a second before Li Zhifeng warmed up again, and his arousal became obvious—he was so full of lust that his skin was flushed and scalding. He reached out to pull You Miao in for a kiss and start another tumble, but You Miao wasn't having it; he only responded with a soft peck before he dressed him in inner robes and underpants.

Then, he called out, "Servants!"

The boy servants filed in; one carried the bathtub out, and one wiped the floor clean of water marks. They busied about in the room, and every so often there'd be the sound of giggling. Still blindfolded, Li Zhifeng began to seem lost at what was happening.

"Take out what's inside that chest," You Miao instructed, pointing at a chest in the corner of the room.

One of the boys did as ordered, and Changyuan said, laughter apparent in his voice, “Butler Feng looks good in that.”

“What ‘butler’? We should call him ‘laoye’ now,” Cheng Guangwu joked.

“No, call me ‘butler,’” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao laughed. “Oh, great general, we are all your servants tonight, and we are serving you.”

The boy servants all laughed as Li Zhifeng’s cheeks reddened. You Miao helped him dress in the robes from the chest, chuckling all the while. Beside him, Changyuan clicked his tongue.

“Shaoye, when did you buy those clothes?”

“I had my little uncle pick them up for me the last time he went to Su Prefecture to buy things. Not bad, right? It’s made of top-grade Su silk.”

“Is shaoye wearing *this* one? Changyuan asked.

“Yup,” You Miao replied happily.

Unable to see anything, Li Zhifeng was moved around like a puppet by his entourage, and he couldn’t help but feel embarrassed by You Miao’s hand as it kept brushing against his crotch.

“Why are we changing?” Li Zhifeng asked, brows furrowed.

“You’ll find out soon,” You Miao answered.

It took about an hour before all was done, and at the end, You Miao instructed, “Leave the hat, this is good. Now scoot.”

“Congratulations, shaoye,” Changyuan said first.

Cheng Guangwu followed. “Congratulations, shaoye. Congratulations, Butler Feng.”

After the boys had filed out, You Miao untied the black ribbon around Li Zhifeng’s eyes, letting it fall to the ground. When Li Zhifeng opened his eyes, bright red lights filled his vision. He was briefly dizzied before all became clear. In but a short time, the room had been transformed into a wedding chamber adorned with red banners, red candles, and vibrantly red lanterns hung high.

Outside the chamber, the dozen boy servants all bowed in unison with their hands cupped, laughing as they hollered, “Congratulations, shaoye! Congratulations!”

“Pass out the grants!” You Miao announced. “Everyone gets one tael of silver! The young master is celebrating a joyous occasion this spring harvest, and the entire estate is exempt from property taxes!”

Cheng Guangwu and the others burst out in merry laughter. Firecrackers crackled as they were set off just as Mu Feng and Mu Yan closed the chamber doors.

With a happy grin, You Miao turned to Li Zhifeng. This night was perfect; the most beautiful of moments. They were both dressed in wedding robes of interwoven red and black—both in men's style.

Li Zhifeng gazed quietly at You Miao. You Miao shifted to the side to let him look at the mirror. The two grooms standing within it were nothing short of a perfect match.

It was as if Li Zhifeng had become mute once more tonight, and he couldn't speak for the longest time. The ruckus outside finally quieted down around midnight. Sitting together at the edge of the bed, Li Zhifeng took a pair of scissors and cut a lock of his own hair. You Miao did the same.

"Intertwining locks to join in marriage," Li Zhifeng murmured, "Until death do us part."

"Mn." A smile hung off of You Miao's lips as he entwined their locks together to tie a knot, and then he reached out to drop the bed curtains. "The Heavens are our betrothal gift, the Earth is our matchmaker, and the world is our witness. Although we didn't go through a traditional wedding ritual, this marriage is real."

Jokingly, Li Zhifeng asked, "Who's the husband and who's the wife?"

You Miao grinned. "Up to you. We can strip now, quick!"

"But I still want to wear these Han-style wedding robes for a bit longer..." Li Zhifeng protested.

You Miao could barely wait any longer. "Nope, nope..."

Highly amused, Li Zhifeng undid his wedding robes, yanked off the inner robe, and stripped You Miao completely bare before tackling him.

That night, the red candles burned until daylight. Hugging Li Zhifeng, You Miao curled into his arms and fell into a deep slumber.

It was just after noon when You Miao was woken by Li Zhifeng—even though he hadn't gotten enough sleep yet. It was rare for Li Zhifeng to wake him early, though it was probably about time for him to rise—even if they did go to bed around daybreak. In his groggy state, he was roused by a flurry of kisses. Just when You Miao was about to reach out to hug him and cling on for a while longer, Li Zhifeng's gaze caught him by surprise. It revealed a deep affection not often seen. It was a gaze full of tenderness and love; a gaze that spoke of how he cherished him. A whole seven years had

passed since the day they met, and those eyes touched the softest spot at the bottom of You Miao's heart.

"Up?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao replied lazily, "I wanna...sleep a bit more..."

"What happens on the second day of the wedding?"

"Greet the parents, offer them tea," You Miao said disinterestedly. "But it's not like your mom and dad are here..."

Li Zhifeng laughed. "Your dad is waiting in the main hall, you know."

Immediately, You Miao's face scrunched into an expression that spoke his thoughts clearly: *Dear Lord... Can't I catch a break?* Feeling resigned, he asked, "How long has he been waiting?"

"Since bright and early in the morning," Li Zhifeng replied.

"Okay, all right, let's get up first and go out," You Miao said.

The moment the doors of his room opened, the boy servants swarmed in to attend to You Miao's dressing and washing. While they worked on You Miao, You Miao pointed at Li Zhifeng, signaling to the servants with his eyes. Li Zhifeng was going to serve You Miao at first, but all of a sudden, he was held down by the boy servants and had to relent. Being moved about by them made him horribly ill at ease, and he froze up stiff as a stick.

As they traversed the corridors afterward, You Miao could see that the grounds were covered in red firecracker scraps all along the way.

You Dechuan was already seated inside the main hall when they got there, and Li Zhifeng turned to brew tea first.

"Why are you home?" You Dechuan asked You Miao.

"Back to take a break for a while," You Miao replied. "I'm tired."

You Dechuan nodded hesitantly, and watching You Miao, he asked, "Nothing happened in Maocheng, did it? You didn't resign, did you?"

Well, doesn't news travel fast to your ears? You Miao thought. You Hange was most likely the one who had sent the news, and You Dechuan was here to probe... But since You Dechuan wasn't going to ask anything so bluntly, You Miao was also happy to not answer anything straight.

Casually, he replied, "It's just a break."

You Dechuan grunted and pressed, "For how long? How are you doing at the Administration Chamber?"

So annoying, God! You Miao grumbled internally, and answered, "It is what it is. Will you stop asking now?"

Seeing the way he was acting, You Dechuan didn't dare to keep prying, so he changed the subject. "Why were there firecrackers going off in the Eastside manor the entire night? Was there a celebration? This morning, I heard the entire estate is exempt from property taxes for the year."

"Mn. There was," You Miao said. "Li Zhifeng returned victorious *and* got married to boot. It's a very happy union."

You Dechuan immediately smiled at this. "Then congratulations to General Li."

"Likewise, likewise," Li Zhifeng answered drily.

Still not getting it, You Dechuan added, "It's about time Miao-zi got married, too."

"Got married last night, no need for you to worry, sir," You Miao said.

Now You Dechuan was perplexed. But just as he was about to ask, Li Zhifeng approached him. With his long, slender fingers delicately holding a colored cup, he placed the tea before him.

You Dechuan took a sip of the proffered cup, still not getting it. You Miao gave him a more obvious hint.

"Li Zhifeng is part of the family from now on."

As understanding finally dawned, You Dechuan was dumbfounded and choked on his tea. In all the years he'd lived, he had never encountered anything like this. Face flushing a bright red, he coughed and hacked, unable to catch his breath.

"You... You...evil creature! Evil!" You Dechuan was furious. Blowing his top, he yelled, "*You abominable animal—*!"

"Hey, now," You Miao chided. Li Zhifeng's face had dropped, but You Miao was already prepared for this meltdown. With a laugh, he said, "Don't talk smack, eh, old man. This union between your unfilial son and General Li was blessed by His Majesty himself, I tell you... See? There's an imperial edict and everything!"

You Miao took out the yellow brocade banner he'd prepared a long time ago and shook it open. "Union blessed by imperial decree! Our current majesty granted Li Zhifeng this marriage. I was a sixth-rank supervisory secretary, but I've resigned from the Administration Chamber. General Li is a fourth-rank officer, and got the title General Huwei of the Northern Expedition. The You family is the one climbing the ladder... Gotta marry up your son to high places, amirite? Isn't this fantastic?!"

"..." You Dechuan was shocked speechless.

Li Zhifeng was equally stunned.

You Miao added, “Black ink on yellow brocade—clear as day. You wanna see for yourself? It’s got the stamp of the emperor, too. This imperial edict is one hundred percent authentic. I was thinking of posting this out by the entrance of our estate!”

Of course there was no way Zhao Chao would issue this sort of edict. But back before You Miao and Zhao Chao fell out, You Miao would often come and go from the palace; the imperial study was like his own personal garden. Whenever Zhao Chao wasn’t around, You Miao routinely stamped a bunch of blank edicts for himself—and no one had ever noticed.

In an instant, You Dechuan’s face turned extremely complicated.

You Miao laughed some more. “What, old man? You can appoint two principal sons, but you refuse to let your son marry a man? That’s unreasonable... Hey, are you okay...? Oh no, somebody! Somebody, come quick!”

He stopped halfway when he saw You Dechuan slumping backward. Startled, he called for the servants as well as a doctor. He had gotten himself and Li Zhifeng into quite the pickle—what a way to shoot his own foot.

How is he so sensitive? Now I’ve done it! You Miao thought.

Thankfully, after the doctor did a check-up, he said it was only a temporary attack induced by rapid anger which some medication would help amend. You Dechuan had been living very well at the estate, having nothing but gourmet meals, so he probably still had a long time left in him. The doctor told You Miao not to worry—there were plenty of opportunities for You Miao to do his filial duty. At this, You Miao finally sighed in relief.

After Li Zhifeng sent the doctor off, he burst out laughing inside the main hall.

“Did lao-san really write this edict?” he asked.

“Just consider that it was him,” You Miao replied, laughing. “Over all these years, I’ve spent hundreds of thousands of taels of silver on him, and you’ve fought yourself to death for him. Half of Southern Tianqi is held up by us, and the other half by my teacher and Nie Dan. Falsifying such a harmless imperial edict is going easy on him.”

Li Zhifeng grinned.

Merrily, You Miao added, “I’ve still got a bunch of blank edicts left, y’know. They’re all stamped with the imperial seal. You can write whatever

you want, as long as he doesn't find out."

From that day forward, Li Zhifeng and You Miao began their extended sabbatical at the estate. There hadn't been any news from Maocheng, and the estate was like a hidden paradise—completely disconnected from the hustle and bustle of the city. When You Miao was idle, he would mount a horse and ride out of the estate, galloping unrestrained across the hills of Mount Qi with Li Zhifeng.

Once they reached a place that was empty of people, they would spend some intimate time out in the wild using the sky as their blanket and the earth as their bed. This was the sixth year they had known each other; You Miao often thought that they were still the same as before, but also different. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng was acting wholly like they were little newlyweds—spoiling You Miao rotten; anything he said was fine and anything he wanted to do was okay. Although that was no different from how they normally were, as the days went by, something more had grown in the tenderness Li Zhifeng showed him.

* * *

Sun Yu's funeral came many days later. It was a grandiose procession; the citizens carried the pall for dozens of miles as they set off from Maocheng to Liu Prefecture. It was a majestic sight. When they came upon the Yangtze River enroute, thousands of vessels big and small ferried across the water, docking at the bank. Just when many started to think that You Miao wouldn't be coming, they found him already standing at the pier waiting when they disembarked. He was dressed in white mourning clothes with a white ribbon tied around his head. Zhao Chao ordered the procession to stop, but You Miao joined the pupils' ranks and sent word to Zhao Chao to keep going.

You Miao didn't walk with the supervisory secretaries of the Administration Chamber; instead, he chose to join Hanlin Academy's group. He had wanted to use this chance to speak a few words with Li Yan, but the first one he saw was Zhang Wenhan. You Miao nodded at him and he returned the gesture.

"Shaoye," Zhang Wenhan greeted.

"You're a grand academician now. There's no need to call me by that address," You Miao said with a smile.

“This is still within the borders of Riverwave Estate. As long as we’re at Riverwave Estate, Zhang Er will still call you ‘shaoye,’” Zhang Wenhan said.

You Miao sighed, then asked, “How are things at court?”

“Ever since you left, His Majesty often sits at Moyan Pavilion,” Zhang Wenhan replied. “He won’t talk to anyone. He just stares at the verse General Nie wrote and drinks.”

“Well, ain’t that tough for him,” You Miao commented. “Running off to drink at Moyan Pavilion when he’s so busy...”

He trailed off when Li Yan showed up, and asked him, “Could I have a word with you in private?”

The two moved to the middle section of the funeral procession where no one else was present. Li Yan glanced back at the troupe behind them.

“How is saozi?” You Miao didn’t care about Li Yan at all, but he did care about Madam Tang. “Has she been brought back?”

“No,” Li Yan said. “She died in Da’an. She was abused to death the second day after we escaped. Her body can no longer be found, so the Tang family set up an empty grave for her. It’s also on the hills of Liu Prefecture, next to Miss Liu.”

You Miao sighed. Souls fade, incense breaks, and beauties fall away—who knew whether those ladies’ spirits could still find their way home.

Li Yan glanced back again at the procession behind them. You Miao looked back as well, following his gaze, but he didn’t notice anything out of sorts.

“Li Zhifeng is at the front,” You Miao said.

Li Yan nodded, but didn’t respond. He seemed extremely hesitant to speak whatever it was he wanted to say; they both knew what the topic was, but neither wanted to bring it up.

“Congratulations,” You Miao said after a moment’s thought.

Li Yan sighed, but didn’t say anything.

There were some things You Miao didn’t want to say, but he still couldn’t swallow them down. *You, Li Yan, replaced me, You Miao. That is the undeniable truth. But in time, Zhao Chao won’t let you off the hook either. This case affects too many things; it’s too broad. Li Yan—you and me, and even Li Zhifeng and Nie Dan, we’re all in the know.*

You Miao continued, “You’ve won the bet, but you’ve laid your life down for it, too. The way I see it...”

He intently locked eyes with Li Yan as he walked. Li Yan's expression dropped, and the small twitch of his face betrayed the fact that You Miao had stabbed him where it hurt. You Miao had resigned and fled right at the peak of his political career, but now he was feeling sorry for Li Yan instead.

Li Yan didn't respond to the subject You Miao had raised, and said instead, "A resolution is needed for General Nie's case. The way you see it, what should we do? Will you talk him into coming out?"

"No one can talk someone like him into anything, you..."

You Miao trailed off when Li Yan glanced back again. This was the third time he'd done that, and it was making You Miao uneasy for some reason. Why did he keep looking back at the funeral procession? Who was there among them?

You Miao didn't look back with Li Yan this time, and casually responded with some placating words regarding Nie Dan. But his mind was spinning rapidly—was this not a funeral procession? What exactly was Li Yan planning?

All of a sudden, someone came to mind. And then, from his fine conjectures, You Miao noticed many subtle details that could easily escape others' notice...

Zhao Zhuo wasn't dead yet. And Sun Yu was also Zhao Zhuo's teacher. In the past, back when the golden bulletin was released at the old capital, Zhao Zhuo had told You Miao that Sun Yu was his first teacher in an attempt to draw You Miao to his side. Sun Yu had once held the position of the crown prince's Grand Tutor... Which meant Zhao Zhuo was indebted to Sun Yu for his education.

Did Li Yan believe that Zhao Zhuo would mix in with the procession in order to send Sun Yu off? Or did it mean that Zhao Zhuo could very possibly show his face today, and charge Zhao Chao with his crimes?

You Miao's heart stopped for a second. He then noticed Tang Hui's Imperial Army was protecting the entire procession—there were far too many citizens, and many were constantly joining along the way. This was perhaps the best opportunity indeed, but Zhao Chao wouldn't be unprepared either.

Having thought this, You Miao stopped paying attention to whatever else Li Yan had to say, focusing on forcing himself to not look back.

"I hear your cousin is now betrothed to General Nie?" Li Yan said, continuing their conversation.

“I don’t know,” You Miao replied. “She can decide who she wants to marry. As her maiden family, I will support whoever she chooses.”

Looking numbed, Li Yan only tilted his head in acknowledgment and didn’t say anymore.

At last, they arrived at the cemetery hill. It wasn’t exactly the best spot as far as fengshui went, but for some reason, aside from those who already had ancestral tombs atop peaks of mountains and hills, the Jiangnan folks all preferred to be buried here. The scenery certainly was quiet and beautiful, and Sun Yu’s beloved had also been buried here when she passed away. Following Sun Yu’s will, the laborers exhumed the grave of his once-lover, whose plaque had nothing but the surname “Li.” Her urn would be buried together with Sun Yu.

Li Zhifeng joined You Miao after he finished his conversation with a group of military commanders. Standing around the grave were Zhao Chao, Li Yan, the six ministers, the pupils of the Administration Chamber, and the scholars of Hanlin Academy. They watched as the coffin was lowered.

You Miao threw down the first shovelful of earth, and then the laborers began to fill the grave. During the entire process, You Miao didn’t say a single word to Zhao Chao. Gradually, the grave was sealed; to rest in peace for many years until the coffin was due to be reopened for the bones to be picked.[21]

Amidst the solemn silence, Li Zhifeng suddenly said to You Miao, “When we die, let’s be buried together too.”

“Okay.”

Li Zhifeng was quiet, and Zhao Chao didn’t hear him clearly, so he asked, “What did General Li say?”

The crowd chuckled, and You Miao said, “To answer Your Majesty, it was nothing.”

The laughter relaxed the mood significantly from the previously tense atmosphere.

“You Ziqian, you’ve already resigned, but We still haven’t seen your estate,” Zhao Chao replied in cheer. “When will you invite Us over to play for a few days?”

Li Zhifeng answered politely, “If you mean it, you can come any time.”

“Why not today?” You Miao suggested.

“Maybe not today.” Zhao Chao chuckled. “We’ve got to hurry back, still. Perhaps We’ll come bother you in the future.”

The rest of the crowd quickly added to the polite banalities; they were previously under the impression that You Miao and Zhao Chao had fallen out, but the scene before them seemed to suggest there was some sort of understanding between them.

While the funeral procession was on its way back to Maocheng, the Imperial Army interrogated citizens along the way. There seemed to be some sort of commotion in the far distance. Li Zhifeng looked over, feeling a little confused, but You Miao pulled him away and told him not to look.

"Tang Hui is arresting people?" Li Zhifeng was surprised.

"Yeah, probably," You Miao said, "But he won't catch anyone."

Since Zhao Zhuo didn't show himself during the send-off when the court officials were present, he wouldn't be so foolish that he'd be discovered now. You Miao didn't even know for certain whether he'd come or not. Everything would depend on the heavens; it wasn't for him to worry about.

As the third month rolled around, the season of spring plowing had arrived once more and the fields were lushly green. It hadn't even been a month since You Miao's return to the estate, and he was already feeling restless. Humans were pathetic like that—back when he was being overworked he used to complain all the time about how tired he was, but he was bored out of his mind now that he was free.

"There's no war, either," You Miao said, sounding rather restless, lying in Li Zhifeng's arms. "What to do?"

"You're still a man, and men are simply incapable of sitting idle," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that statement. "I've never been anything else."

Pressing on one of his own shoulders, Li Zhifeng flexed his elbow. "I also haven't worked out in a long time."

As they talked, Changyuan came over with a ledger. "The accounts for spring. Will shaoye take a look?"

"Nah," You Miao said. "Little uncle can take care of it just fine."

Changyuan didn't leave, however, and said, "Lord Uncle started a fight with the locals over a piece of land in Yi Prefecture."

"Huh?!" You Miao was more shocked than he would be if he'd heard Nie Dan had picked up a crossdressing habit. "Are there still people who'd dare start a fight with the You family?"

“I’ll go set them straight,” Li Zhifeng declared. “What are their names?”

Changyuan gave a wry smile. “Lord Uncle told us not to say anything, but a few days ago, Shaowei went along to collect debt and got beaten up. We’re the ones who are outraged... Lord Uncle said shaoye already resigned from his position, so he needn’t worry about these things...”

This was clearly the most absurd thing You Miao had ever heard, and he demanded, “The nerve of them! What happened? They dare hit people from *our* family? Don’t walk away, tell me everything in detail.”

“It was people from the Lin family. They came to our gambling hall for some fun, but refused to pay up when they lost...”

“Since when did we have a gambling hall?” You Miao was so confused. “Wait, wait, wait. Start from the beginning.”

Thus, Changyuan told the story, which took nearly two hours and ended up rendering You Miao absolutely speechless. It was Qiao Jue who’d opened a gambling hall—no wonder he kept running over to visit Yi Prefecture. The gambling hall’s business had grown and attracted quite a number of aristocratic youngsters. Among them was one named Lin, who often solicited hangers-on by acting generous to those in need in Jianghu—sub-society men. Yet he had lost thousands of silver at the gambling establishment. The Lin family relied on the fact that they had members in the imperial court, and because they heard You Miao had resigned, they said they’d put their gambling debts on their tab. They claimed that they’d repay the debt after a win; they were frequent customers, after all. The staff did not respond well, however, and Young Master Lin flipped out at the manager. Qiao Jue happened to be onsite at the time, and because Shaowei had been abrasive with his words, the two sides started a push and shove and fists began flying.

“Have Tang Hui take his troops over there to crush them,” Li Zhifeng said. “I’ll write him a letter.”

You Miao was left speechless by his response. “...No, don’t do that. Even though you’re still enlisted in the military, you’re not a commander anymore, and privately ordering the Imperial Army around is a huge taboo. It wouldn’t look good if this got brought to san-ge’s attention. Listen to me—let’s make a trip over there ourselves. It’s not like we’re doing anything else. Come on, let’s go out.”

Just as You Miao was about to leave the estate, Qiao Jue came rushing out the door and tried to talk him out of the trip. But You Miao told him it

was fine; that he would take the chance to stroll around Yi Prefecture. And then, he mounted a horse with Li Zhifeng and the two set off.

[Chapter 59]

Yi Prefecture was the Jiangnan gentry's primary and largest base. When Tianqi's founding father first quelled the south hundreds of years ago and reclaimed the southern prefectures, many migrated to Yang, Su, and Liu Prefectures. In spite of this, the origin of southern commerce and related local powers remained in Yi Prefecture.

There were once three major clans in Yi Prefecture: the Tangs, the Lins, and the Gus. Tang Bo's main patriarchal branch of the family had later moved to the north of Yang Prefecture, but the majority of the family stayed in Yi Prefecture. When Tu Risheng raised the peasant army in Jiang Prefecture, they headed eastward, causing imminent danger to the gentry clans of Yi Prefecture. Thankfully, in the end, You Miao guided the battle toward Yang Prefecture, and the north of Yi Prefecture was consequently saved from the uprising.

In order to travel to Yi Prefecture from Riverwave Estate, You Miao and Li Zhifeng had to cross the entirety of Yang Prefecture. They were now in the middle of spring, and showers drizzled across the hills and fields. You Miao was quite happy admiring the scenery with Li Zhifeng, sauntering here and there as they made their way. During the day, they would travel several dozen miles at a leisurely pace. At night, they would settle in a place they liked and fall into gentle slumber wrapped in blankets, listening to the night rain and whispers of the wind through the bamboo groves. There was a sort of pleasure to be found in a journey like this.

They passed many days thus; You Miao admired the scenery while Li Zhifeng admired You Miao, and they dallied the entire way. By the time they had finally made it to Yi Prefecture, over a dozen days had passed since they left Riverwave Estate.

You Miao was shaken the moment they entered town. Yi Prefecture was nicknamed "the Little Capital," and what filled his vision was a glamor no less than what the old capital used to possess. The goods of Jiaobei and south of Yang Prefecture were all distributed through here. The hustle and bustle of this logistical crossroads was quite a different scene from that of Yang Prefectural City.

"Back then, da-ge mentioned wanting to establish the new capital in Yi Prefecture," Li Zhifeng said. "There was certainly logic in that."

You Miao smiled. “And how come it didn’t work out?”

“Your teacher was against it, and I also didn’t want to move here,” Li Zhifeng said. “It’s too far from home, and there are too many people here; too much chaos. It’s not safe.”

You Miao nodded. The goods sold in the markets were things he rarely saw back at Yang Prefecture—there were coconuts from the south along the sea, tortoise shells, unique jewels, and other such treasures from overseas. There were even slave traders along the sides of the roads with bands of dark-skinned slaves from foreign lands.

There was plenty to eat, as well. This was the first day of You Miao’s visit, and besides business matters, his primary impression of the city was in its food. There were hundreds of varieties of food; anything flying in the sky and anything walking the earth could be consumed. Thinking the fishballs sold in the street stalls looked interesting, he dragged Li Zhifeng along. Imitating the other passersby, they ate as they made purchases.

“Where’s our gambling hall?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng hadn’t bothered much with the goings-on at home since entering court, so he also didn’t know the answer. They asked around as they strolled—the people of the city seemed to know the hall well enough, and they all pointed at the largest gambling hall around, saying that was the one opened by the You family of Jiangnan.

When You Miao entered the establishment, the magnificence of the hall washed over him. What grandeur! Qiao Jue truly was an expert when it came to doing business. Li Zhifeng opened his mouth and was about to say something, but You Miao stopped him with his eyes, signaling that it was fine.

“Let’s look around first,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng made a noise of acknowledgment and said, “There are many Jianghu men about. Follow me and don’t do anything rash.”

Trailing obediently behind Li Zhifeng, You Miao laughed in spite of himself.

“What’s so funny?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“I’ll be your boy servant this time,” You Miao replied in amusement.

Li Zhifeng was also amused now. When they entered the hall, the reception girls welcomed them with smiles.

“Well now, shaoye, come play a few hands?”

Being called “shaoye” startled You Miao at first, thinking he’d been caught, but he quickly calmed down. Only a few companion girls had come their way, and the manager only cast a glance at them, so he figured that the “shaoye” address was the norm here. You Miao bowed his head to hide his smile. To his surprise, however, more girls emerged, smiling as they surrounded him.

“Does the little young master want to play Pai Gow[22] or Dai Siu?[23]”

It seemed everyone around considered him the young master. *No way. Is it that obvious?* You Miao wondered.

Also feeling helpless at the turn of events, Li Zhifeng switched his role easily enough and said, “My young master is only here to look around and dabble, nothing serious.”

You Miao nodded. “I hear Young Master Lin, Lin Xihe, comes here often. I do want to make his acquaintance.”

One of the girls smiled in understanding and brought You Miao to the Dai Siu table, where the croupier nodded at him with a smile in greeting and beckoned him to have a seat. Li Zhifeng positioned himself by You Miao’s side to watch.

The ones sitting around the table were all Jianghu men, and sitting across from them was a pale-skinned young master with unfocused eyes. Even You Miao could tell that those men were most likely kept by Lin Xihe. You Miao had only just sat down when Li Zhifeng’s gaze moved somewhere further away—the manager had emerged. The manager had been looking their way, and had noticed You Miao. He whispered something to several others, and the one in charge of their area called a different croupier over to manage their table.

“I bet big,” You Miao said cheerfully.

With an effortless flick of his wrist, Li Zhifeng shot a chip to the table, which nailed itself firmly onto the surface with a *clack*. The crowd erupted in cheers at the display.

“I bet small.”

There were dark circles of fatigue under Lin Xihe’s eyes—who knows how long he’d been hanging out here. Behind him, a large, buff man pushed over the betting chips. The crowd began to place their bets, removing their hands from the table once it was done.

“What’s your name?” Lin Xihe asked.

“Li.” You Miao flashed a sly grin and replied, “Nice to meet you.”

The croupier raised the dice cup. It was a pair of twos—You Miao had lost.

You Miao gestured with his finger, and Li Zhifeng added to the bet. When the men saw that there was nothing suspicious about the pair, they picked up the conversation they were having before.

"Heh, what strange affairs, eh? Both the old and young emperors are dead. Who knows what next year will bring."

"There's a rumor in Yang Prefecture that the young one ain't dead yet," said another. "Something major's gonna happen in the next few years, I bet."

A boor complained, "The northerners have all fled down here to the south; how is that not major already? Go to war, they said! But they didn't need us! And now they're saying they're not fighting anymore. Are we gonna be a bunch of chickens, cooped up here in the south for the rest of our lives?! It's so frustrating!"

A man wearing a bamboo hat laughed. "The brothers are fighting internally, the emperors are all dead, and General Nie entered the dead man's prison. It'll be hard to fight and reclaim the north, in my opinion." He shook his head ruefully.

"Watch what you say, pal," someone reminded him, out of good will.

"Laws don't reach remote places! What do we got to be scared about?!" the boor exclaimed.

Another heckled, "Go join the army if you wanna fight, then!"

The boor didn't back down. "What's what?! When war starts again, I'll be the first to enlist!"

Silently, the croupier raised the cup again. It was three snake eyes. You Miao had lost again.

"The young one isn't dead yet, I don't think. Where'd you guys hear that?" You Miao asked Lin Xihe.

Lin Xihe answered casually, "Nothing but nonsense passed on from Yang Prefectural City. With the way the world is, though, it doesn't matter whether he's alive or dead. Zhao Chao won't allow him to live."

These guys really dare to say whatever crosses their mind, huh, You Miao thought. *If Zhao Chao hears about this...*

But then he realized that there was nothing Zhao Chao could do, even if he did find out. With his temper, he might want to end them—except he didn't have that power. He had to compromise with the gentry, but it was

obvious that the people's condemnation of him was seething like a cauldron. It wouldn't die down for many years yet.

The cup rose and You Miao had lost, again.

"I'm done!" the boor yelled and withdrew his remaining chips.

The other man wearing the bamboo hat also left. While Li Zhifeng went to exchange more chips, Lin Xihe struck up a conversation again with You Miao.

"Where are you from, Li-xiong? You don't look local."

You Miao grinned. "From Sichuan. I'm here to do some small business with my older brother."

"How long will you stay in Yi Prefecture?" Lin Xihe asked with a smile.

"We'll see," You Miao said. "Until all the goods on hand are sold."

Lin Xihe gave an "oh" in response, and wondered, "What kind of business does your family do?"

Li Zhifeng returned with the betting chips, and You Miao pushed a pile of them onto the table. The two continued to gamble, and the bets they placed grew bigger and bigger.

"Some Sichuan specialties," You Miao answered with a grin. "I'll pick up some tea leaves on the way home."

In between the back-and-forth questions, You Miao had lost several hundred taels of silver, and a mountain of chips began to pile in front of Lin Xihe. Lin Xihe laughed.

"Li-xiong, your luck is down. You don't wanna try playing anything else?"

You Miao smirked. "I'm just having some casual fun, it doesn't matter."

He said this as he pushed eighteen hundred silver's worth of chips onto the table. Now no one else was betting, not after that. You Miao had started his bets small, but with every round, he'd double them—ten silver going on twenty, and so on. His losses gradually snowballed with each round he lost, until finally, not even Lin Xihe could take it anymore.

"Li-xiong, the next round will be three grand..."

You Miao pushed his chips out, grinning. "Three thousand and six hundred silver."

Everyone at the hall was shocked, and many of the patrons rushed over to the table to check out this loaded little young master. Sweat had broken out on Lin Xihe's forehead, and the crowd chanted in a clamor as the cup was raised.

“Big! Big! Big!”

The croupier raised the cup. Lin Xihe had bet big, and You Miao small. This round, Lin Xihe won again.

Lin Xihe sighed a breath of relief, then flashed a smile at You Miao. “If Li-xiong is free...”

“Seven thousand and two hundred silver,” You Miao said, smiling still.

“...” Lin Xihe was speechless.

A look of understanding dawned on You Miao’s face. “Is Lin-xiong leaving? Take care.”

The crowd was silent for a moment before they exploded in an uproar.

Lin Xihe smiled. “Since you’re in the mood, Li-xiong, I shall of course accompany you. It’s just...” He looked at Li Zhifeng.

You Miao looked back and asked Li Zhifeng, “Did we bring enough money?”

“Yes,” Li Zhifeng replied. “Let’s use bills, though.”

Li Zhifeng took out a wad of cash and handed it to You Miao. You Miao was too lazy to count it, however, and simply tossed it onto the table.

“Twenty-five thousand,” Li Zhifeng stated.

“M’kay. I bet small,” You Miao said.

Lin Xihe spoke up, “On top of the four grand I just won, I have another item—I wonder if it’s appropriate to add it to the bet?”

He dug out a jade bracelet from his robes and placed it on the table. You Miao could tell with a single glance that it was made of top-grade emerald jade, with an estimated worth of at least two to three hundred silver. He found this cheap act hilarious, but he didn’t expose Lin Xihe.

“Just add it to the bet,” You Miao said, grinning. “They all say Lin-xiong is supremely honorable. I’m sure you wouldn’t be indebted to xiaodi with this small sum?”

Lin Xihe burst out laughing. “Interesting. I will accept your friendship!”

Smiling all the while, You Miao said, “Truth be told, Lin-xiong, as long as you can make me sincerely accept my losses today, my assets *and* life will all be yours to take.”

It was then that the crowd came to realize that You Miao had come bearing everything he had for the sake of seeking refuge with Lin Xihe, and loud cheers erupted from all around! In only a few simple words, You Miao had excited the entire gambling hall!

Lin Xihe said, “When the cup is raised this round, we won’t talk of wins or losses. Li-xiandi, come home with me and gege will take care of your everything. I will not mistreat you.”

Praises were sung and tongues were clicked from the other patrons, who felt both admiration and envy. You Miao, however, only gave a relieved smile of delight and gestured for the croupier to raise the cup.

“Big! Big! Big!” the crowd chanted excitedly.

It was easy to see that Lin Xihe was popular among the locals here. Thus, the cup was raised as everyone rubbed their hands in anticipation.

Two points. You Miao won.

This time, it was You Miao’s turn to laugh heartily. Feeling somewhat embarrassed, Lin Xihe smiled wryly in resignation.

“Today’s playtime has been satisfying,” Lin Xihe said. “Xiandi, why don’t you come with me for a stroll? Yuxiong can take you around to check out Yi Prefecture. I can call over some local friends, and we’ll give xiandi a welcome feast.”

“The gambling table is ever-changing,” You Miao consoled him with a smile. “I ate quite a bit when I first arrived, so I’m not hungry right now. Come on then, fourteen thousand four hundred silver.”

The room fell deathly silent.

Lin Xihe was taken aback, but quickly changed back to a smile. “Again? Let’s not.”

You Miao leaned back against his chair, and said, “No? Take care, then, Lin-xiong.”

Lin Xihe’s face dropped a little, and the crowd began to whisper among themselves, not knowing what was up You Miao’s sleeves. Because You Miao had looked extremely bold and rich, they initially thought he had come with his vast wealth in order to join Lin Xihe’s camp. But now, this?

Finding the situation funny, You Miao shook his head in resignation. No sooner had Lin Xihe just stood up, he had sat back down again.

“We continue?” You Miao asked.

Lin Xihe rolled up his sleeves. “Let’s do it.”

“Pay your gambling debt first,” You Miao said.

Lin Xihe froze, and You Miao continued, “This jade bracelet is only worth three or four hundred silver. Why don’t you pawn it first, then pay xiaodi the cash?”

Now all the Jianghu guests were in an uproar, but no one dared to yell curses. You Miao had reason on his side, as well as Li Zhifeng who had flashed his skills earlier.

At the raise of You Miao's hand, the manager came forward with an iron ruler, and You Miao proceeded to count all the betting chips with a broad grin. Once everything was tallied, You Miao said, "Including what you owe my gambling hall last month, the total is four thousand silver."

Lin Xihe's expression clouded over immediately, and the Jianghu men exchanged looks of dismay.

You Miao asked, "I wonder what Lin-xiong's relationship is with Lord Lin Zhengtao?"

Lin Xihe stared at You Miao, knowing full well that things would not go well for him today. "He's my uncle."

You Miao sighed. "As a court official, Lord Lin is straight as a ruler. Xiaodi has always admired him. So? Anyone else wanna play?"

No one placed any bets—the patrons all knew now that the head honcho of the gambling hall had come. No one had expected You Miao would come all the way to Yi Prefecture just to cross the Lin family.

The leader of the mob shot the group a look, then said to Lin Xihe, "Please relax, Lin-shaoye. We brothers will bring you the money."

Lin Xihe nodded, but didn't respond. The group dispersed.

You Miao knew Lin Xihe's band of hangers-on had likely gone out to find a place to discuss the situation among themselves. He didn't comment on it, however, and only sat happily with a broad grin.

Moments later, the manager came over and said in a low voice, "Laoye, may I have a word?"

Li Zhifeng grunted in reply. When You Miao heard the manager address him as "laoye," he knew Riverwave Estate had already sent word to the gambling hall when they had set off half a month ago.

He gave Lin Xihe a cheerful nod. "Make yourself comfortable, Lin-xiong."

As if Lin Xihe was in the mood to talk—his face was as dark as a threshold guardian's. Never mind four grand; he couldn't even pay the one thousand silver he owed the month prior, else he wouldn't have dragged around his debt like this.

"Make him some tea," You Miao said offhandedly, then followed the manager to the back hall to have tea himself.

* * *

“How long has that tool been hanging around at our gambling hall?” You Miao demanded as soon as he sat down.

The manager replied, “To answer laoye, he only started frequenting this past month. He likes to recruit Jianghu hangers-on at the gambling hall.”

You Miao’s face darkened, and he snapped, “Lord Uncle doesn’t know better, but you—you let people fight inside the hall?”

His anger made the manager kneel immediately. “Pray that laoye understand! I really had no choice. The Lin family has connections at the imperial court, and they like to give money away to those boors and gallivant around with them. Whether or not the Jianghu men had travel expenses, he’d take care of them all. On that day, a mob had gathered outside yelling that they’d destroy the hall; we really were at the end of our rope, which was why your Lord Uncle said to let it go in order to appease the masses.”

“You can stand,” Li Zhifeng said. “Are there men outside surrounding the hall right now?”

Someone was sent to check, and the boy servant returned to report that there was still a large mob outside.

Li Zhifeng put down his cup. “I’ll go dismiss them.”

“No rush,” You Miao said. “If they don’t make a move, then we won’t make a move. You; come over here.”

He waved a boy servant over and instructed him, “Go outside the entrance and repeat to them what I’m about to say: General Huwei has come to inspect his own gambling hall. He is impressed with the strength of everyone’s friendship today, but merely wants to have a few words with Young Master Lin. Ever since ancient times, it’s only right to pay what you owe. As soon as the money is here, we will naturally send him home in a carriage. We promise this, and pray everyone not to worry.”

The boy servant left to carry out the order. You Miao knew that Li Zhifeng’s history of fighting from the north to the south had earned him a thunderous reputation. No one would dare to step inside to seek their own ruin with him sitting inside the gambling hall. Besides, a grand general of the kingdom shouldn’t lower himself to fight a bunch of uncultured thugs. You Miao’s speech was as firm as it was gentle; the men out there would surely listen.

The manager didn't dare to speak, so You Miao finished his pot of tea. The servants then came to help him and Li Zhifeng with changing and washing up. The manager followed, telling them that rooms in the inner courtyard had been prepared and asking whether they wished to take their meals or rest. But You Miao didn't know what he wanted to do for the moment, either.

After he changed, Li Zhifeng asked, "Wanna go out for a stroll? I saw plenty of things to eat at the markets. Let me buy you something."

You Miao nodded, and the two ditched Lin Xihe at the gambling hall and left out the back door.

Dusk had fallen by then. Since Yi Prefectural City never had any history of curfews, lights were lit across the city, illuminating its majestic prosperity. It very much resembled Yang Prefectural City's nuit-blanche entertainment from when You Miao was younger, which spanned for miles.

"What were you gonna do if you lost the fourteen thousand silver?" Li Zhifeng suddenly asked. "I didn't have any more money on me at the time."

You Miao didn't think the gambling was still on Li Zhifeng's mind. With a smirk, he said dismissively, "He didn't have that money."

"What if you lost the seven thousand and two hundred silver?" Li Zhifeng pressed.

"If we lost, we lost," You Miao said. "We'd continue to act dumb and go home with him; to eat and drink and be merry at the Lin's household and be his guests. Wouldn't that also be fun?"

Li Zhifeng grinned helplessly at that.

You Miao continued, "Losing consecutively for twenty, thirty rounds... The manager was keeping an eye on us. Did you see how he recognized me immediately?"

"Hm." Li Zhifeng nodded. "He was alerted as soon as we stepped into the gambling hall because you and Lord Uncle look alike. He was also the one who withdrew the chips for me later."

"There you go, then." You Miao nodded cheerfully.

The taverns in Yi Prefectural City were bustling, and entire streets were packed with food shops. There were giant wooden vats outside the doors of all of these establishments, inside of which were live shrimp, fish, and other types of seafood You Miao couldn't name. Too lazy to carry food back, he and Li Zhifeng ordered their fare on the streets and took their meal—

consisting of several dishes and a couple small cups of wine—right there on the spot, acting like a little married couple all the while.

You Miao peeled shrimp for Li Zhifeng and prompted him to drink, but Li Zhifeng stared at him, finding his gestures funny.

"What are you laughing about?" You Miao asked, confused.

Li Zhifeng only shook his head, and You Miao urged, "Drink some more, go on."

You Miao topped up Li Zhifeng's cup, and Li Zhifeng sighed. "I don't want to go back to Yang Prefecture anymore."

"Then we'll settle in Yi Prefecture, that's fine too," You Miao replied. He knew Li Zhifeng yearned for this kind of free lifestyle.

Li Zhifeng tossed back his drink and set the cup down heavily, the rims of his eyes a little red from the effect of alcohol. He gazed at You Miao.

"Anywhere is good as long as I'm with you," You Miao added.

"It's nice beyond the Wall, too," Li Zhifeng said. "I still can't forget it."

You Miao's home was in Jiangnan, and he often missed it when he used to live at the old capital. Although everything was fine at the capital—there was no lack of food or clothing, and he had a huge gang of friends—he never thought it was where he belonged. It wasn't home. When he returned to Jiangnan, everything was dear to him, be it the rice or water. He could understand how Li Zhifeng felt about the lands beyond the Wall.

"You can make the decision." You Miao didn't get too deep into it, and only said, "Follow the man you marry, be he chicken or dog. If you really can't get used to living here, we can migrate between Jiangnan and the northlands; spend half the year in each place, right?"

Li Zhifeng nodded pensively. You Miao took a sip of wine but didn't swallow, and quietly shuffled closer to Li Zhifeng. Sensing him, Li Zhifeng tilted his head to face him. All around them at the restaurant, there were people swinging fists and playing drinking games, and waiters shuttling between tables. The large red lanterns bathed them with a bright crimson hue. When their lips touched, Li Zhifeng sealed his firmly over You Miao's and drank that mouthful of wine.

When the night deepened and all had quieted down, Li Zhifeng carried You Miao on his back and the two chatted and laughed as they returned to the gambling hall.

Eastside Yi Prefectural City was peaceful, most people were asleep. Outside the gambling hall there stood a lone man, his face illuminated by

the large red lantern upon which was written the word “You.” A sword hung from his waist, and he stood there unspeaking with his arms folded.

Li Zhifeng frowned slightly, and You Miao hopped off his back. He squeezed Li Zhifeng’s hand, who responded with a slow shake of his head, gesturing for You Miao to relax.

“He’s no match for me,” Li Zhifeng whispered.

You Miao could tell with one look that this guy was likely here to negotiate, and to take Lin Xihe away. Although You Miao treated Jianghu men with respect, that didn’t necessarily mean he cared for them. After all, he was a learned man who also worked for the government; he didn’t run in Jianghu circles, and he didn’t speak according to the laws of Jianghu.

In You Miao’s mind, a man ought to be someone like Nie Dan—a hero was only great because he served the state and the people. A man wasn’t defined by his ability to pick up a weapon; to cleave and kill for quick satisfaction. Vigilantes and swashbucklers used martial arts to commit transgressions, which was why You Miao didn’t care much for their kind. As for Li Zhifeng, a person who’d reached the rank of commander, he naturally wouldn’t be too fussed by small disputes with Jianghu men.

However, this man was exceedingly polite. The moment he spotted You Miao and Li Zhifeng, he immediately cupped his hands in a salute. “Gentlemen.”

You Miao nodded. “How do I address you? Shall we talk inside?”

The man declined the offer, however. “You-shaoxia[24] is too kind. This humble one has come on behalf of his master, who hopes to invite You-shaoxia and General Li for a conversation.”

This raised You Miao’s guard, and Li Zhifeng answered, “We don’t feel like going anywhere. Tell your master to come here tomorrow.”

You Miao could guess what Li Zhifeng was thinking. It was late, the night was quiet, and these martial arts men possessed no sense of the gravity of things. Any accidents would be a handful to deal with.

But unexpectedly, the man handed over a bracelet. “My master is currently waiting at Luan Hall. After tonight, he will be going out to sea.”

Suspiciously, You Miao studied his face as he took the bracelet. Wasn’t this the emerald jade bracelet Lin Xihe presented today as collateral? Was there another one? This was practically a twin of the other.

You Miao furrowed his brows and shook his head. “I don’t recognize this bracelet. Butler, do you recognize it?”

Li Zhifeng was also a little doubtful, not knowing what it meant. After taking a look at the bracelet, he asked, “This belongs to your master?”

The Jianghu man seemed a bit disappointed and confused. “Shaoxia doesn’t recognize this? How strange.”

You Miao was absolutely baffled, and Li Zhifeng questioned, “Is this something from the old capital?”

It suddenly dawned on You Miao, and he carefully re-examined the object under the lantern light. He noticed a few characters engraved on the inside of the bracelet—it was the name of an old and famous jadecraft shop from the former capital. Instantly, the colors of his face changed and he broke out in a cold sweat.

“Take me to see him, right this instant!”

Even You Miao’s voice had changed. Without further ado, he and Li Zhifeng climbed into a carriage.

* * *

The lights were still bright in the west end of the city where taverns continued their operation into the night. Southern songs in enchanting voices wafted from the music halls in the distance, though the music was different from the lilting tunes of the Su and Yang Prefectures.

The carriage stopped inside a courtyard somewhere remote, and so too did the music fade in the distance. A man emerged to welcome You Miao and Li Zhifeng, and led them into the hall while the Jianghu man stopped at the door and went no further.

“Who can it be?” Li Zhifeng asked You Miao under his breath. He was mostly sober now.

You Miao replied in a whisper, “It’s quite possibly the one who managed not to die. Of course, it could also be someone else... When we see him, let me do the talking. Don’t promise them anything.”

Li Zhifeng nodded. You Miao’s heart was pounding; he had never been this nervous in his life. Thoughts churned in his head—if it really was Zhao Zhuo, what should he say? Yet no matter how hard he tried to think, his mind remained blank.

As they were led through the kitchen in the inner courtyard, You Miao noticed Li Zhifeng was gripping a copper coin in his fist. He patted his hand, gesturing that he needn’t be so nervous. Regardless of who awaited

them, they wouldn't kick up a huge commotion just to cause the two of them trouble.

After the kitchen was a small alley, at the end of which was another courtyard; one that was very quiet. As soon as they entered, the bodyguards closed the doors behind them.

"Shidi."

The man standing there turned around, wearing a smile. You Miao and Li Zhifeng both froze, shocked by who they were seeing.

Zhao Zhuo looked as pleasant as always—just as he had the first time You Miao met him years ago in the old capital during Mid-Autumn. However, his locks were now peppered with white. Drawing in a deep breath, You Miao shook in spite of himself.

"General Li," Zhao Zhuo greeted. "Thank you both for coming."

Li Zhifeng was shaking uncontrollably as he stared at the man behind Zhao Zhuo. Sensing something amiss, You Miao turned to look at Li Zhifeng. The man in question was short in build, and exuded the air of a martial artist. He spared Li Zhifeng only a glance before his eyes turned to and stayed on You Miao.

"Your Majesty," You Miao said, undecided on whether he should bow or what other sort of etiquette was required in such circumstances. However, Zhao Zhuo exempted him from these complicated matters.

"Come sit. I only wish to catch up with an old friend and fellow disciple tonight; nothing more."

You Miao nodded. "Shixiong."

The two sat at the stone table in the yard, and Zhao Zhuo made a gesture of invitation with his hand. Li Zhifeng snapped out of it and took a seat as well. The man standing behind Zhao Zhuo remained standing, however.

"Li Zhifeng?" You Miao finally sensed that something was off with him, however, Li Zhifeng didn't respond. Instead, he stared intently at the short soldier and questioned something in the Quanrong tongue. The short soldier nodded and replied in Quanrong as well.

Immediately, You Miao guessed the plot. Li Zhifeng had taught him how to speak Quanrong, and although You Miao didn't remember much of it, he still understood a word here and there. What they had said just now was, without a doubt, the language of Li Zhifeng's father's tribe. Which meant that Zhao Zhuo's guard was a Quanrong man. But what did that

mean?! Had Zhao Zhuo and the Quanrong tribe come to some sort of agreement?!

Zhao Zhuo personally brewed tea for You Miao, and You Miao gasped. “Mount Jun Silver Needle.”

“Mmm,” Zhao Zhuo replied. “I know you rarely drink green tea, but I don’t have much else with which to treat you. I often miss the Xingyang Maojian from the Central Plains, but I can never manage to get my hands on it.”

“We’ll return one day,” You Miao said.

“Yeah.” Zhao Zhuo sighed. “The day of Mister Sun’s funeral, I watched you all from afar on the hill. When I was young, he’d frequently beat my hand with the ferule. To think twenty years would pass us by in the blink of an eye, just like that. I always thought he would live for a few years longer. I often feel guilty that I’ve no more chances to repay his instruction.”

“Mister Sun lived for over seventy years. He served the country his entire life, and now he can truly rest at last,” You Miao said.

Zhao Zhuo nodded. Then he asked, “Did he say anything before he passed?”

“Here,” You Miao said, “You can have this.”

He took out the envelope that contained the two verses Sun Yu had written for him before he passed away, and handed it to Zhao Zhuo. Zhao Zhuo took out the sheet, and after a glance at it, the rims of his eyes grew red. He shuddered as he began to weep. Sorrow welled up, and You Miao only sat there and listened quietly, not daring to say anything.

Ever since Li Zhifeng spotted the Quanrong man, he had also remained silent. Despite his height, the Quanrong man had been keeping his eyes on Li Zhifeng’s hands. The clash of their battle auras was almost tangible.

When Zhao Zhuo finally stopped crying, he sighed and wiped away his tears. “Thanks, Ziqian,” he said.

You Miao knew that Zhao Zhuo was taking a huge risk by seeing him today. If You Miao told the court about him, one couldn’t begin to imagine what would happen next. But You Miao wouldn’t say a word about it—it’d only cause more trouble if Zhao Chao learned about this.

Whether it was for business or personal reasons, You Miao didn’t think what Zhao Zhuo was doing was a good idea. But since they were here, naturally, it wouldn’t be for the sake of something as simple as catching up. There had to be more Zhao Zhuo wanted to tell him.

“That day, a loyal servant was willing to die for me. That was how General Li was deceived,” Zhao Zhuo started.

“Mn,” Li Zhifeng agreed. “I’ve never met you before, so I didn’t know what happened.”

“I should’ve been the one who went to the peace talks,” You Miao said.

Zhao Zhuo chuckled wryly. “Which is why they say that human plans are no match against the heavens. Don’t take it to heart, Ziqian.”

You Miao nodded. His mind wasn’t really on that issue; as he was thinking about how to lead into the main subject, Zhao Zhuo said, “It was on my instructions that the Lin child caused so much trouble for you.”

You Miao laughed at that. “I’ll let him go when I get back.”

Zhao Zhuo nodded. “I will go out to sea tomorrow, heading for Dongying.[25] Do excuse me for the trouble.”

This announcement truly felt like a hefty burden had been lifted from You Miao’s shoulders. But You Miao still couldn’t be sure of Zhao Zhuo’s true intentions—was it to seek asylum in that foreign land, never to return? What would be his next step? Why was he with a Quanrong?

You Miao couldn’t ask any of these questions. He would have to discuss tonight’s events with Li Zhifeng after they went back before he’d know how to respond.

You Miao said, “Mister Sun still wondered about you even right before his passing. He only closed his eyes when he heard you and your father had returned.”

The news made Zhao Zhuo choke up and weep once more. A moment later, he said with tears still streaming, “My little brother will be a good emperor. King Dalyeko sent me his personal guard to escort me south for this entire journey, and everywhere we passed, the people lived in wealth and prosperity. The country is peaceful and well-managed.”

He then dropped his voice. “Before I leave, there are two matters and three people I am worried about. Ziqian, considering we are peers who studied under the same teacher, will you help me?”

“Please feel free to speak plainly, Your Majesty,” You Miao said. “Although I’ve already resigned from my post, as long as it’s something within my power to do, I am willing to make rounds at court.”

And so, Zhao Zhuo said, “The first person is General Nie.”

Understanding, You Miao nodded. “I will do my best to ensure he doesn’t die.”

“The second person is Li Yan,” Zhao Zhuo said. “You must remind my little brother to guard against that man.”

You Miao was a little surprised by this request, but he nodded nonetheless.

“The third person is the Quanrong King Dalyeko,” Zhao Zhuo continued. “I was injured and ill, and it was the Quanrong who took me in...”

This time, You Miao didn’t answer.

“Sanado, you’ve been with Ziqian for seven years now,” Zhao Zhuo said. “Your elder brother often thinks of you and wishes for you to return to the tribe.”

Li Zhifeng only gave an indifferent response. “Hm.”

“I do not know how well you brothers get along, but war should never be allowed to start between the Quanrong and Tianqi. Of all the Barbarian tribes from beyond the Wall, only the Quanrong have been able to live peacefully alongside Tianqi throughout the centuries,” Zhao Zhuo said.

“This, I can’t promise,” You Miao said. “Li Yan and Nie Dan are but domestic affairs, but the matter with Quanrong concerns the Barbarians—it concerns the country, the homeland.”

Zhao Zhuo nodded, looking exhausted.

You Miao added, “But Sanado has been with me for so many years. Even without a promise to you, I will still do my utmost to halt any chances of war with the Quanrong. At the very least, I will not allow the two countries to become enemies. Now, what are the two matters?”

“The first matter,” Zhao Zhuo began. “While father and I were in the north, father promised the Tartars the territory north of the Yangtze to bargain for our freedom, with the river as the border. The Barbarians may use that offer to extort Tianqi, so an appropriate plan must made in anticipation.”

You Miao nodded. There must have been many unspeakable hardships that had prompted that deal to be offered.

Zhao Zhuo was silent for a long time, and You Miao remained silent with him. A long while later, when You Miao looked up, he found that Zhao Zhuo had been staring at him seriously with tears welling in his eyes.

“What’s the second matter?” You Miao asked.

“The second matter.” Zhao Zhuo’s eyebrows drew together as he continued to stare at You Miao—almost as if he was feeling sorry for him,

but also as if in sorrow. “You must extract yourself early. Considering his character, I’m afraid that my little brother won’t let you get away. I can’t bear to see you spend an entire lifetime working with all your heart, only to end up irrevocably wasted.”

Only at this moment did You Miao feel that he truly understood Zhao Zhuo.

It wasn’t that he’d never thought about these things—the promises Zhao Chao made to Li Zhifeng, and You Miao’s subsequent resignation and return to the estate...all of that was because deep down, You Miao didn’t feel safe. He often worried that one day he’d end up killed after he’d outlived his usefulness. Zhao Chao’s seat on the throne was insecure, and right now he still needed You Miao and his cadre’s support. But in the future, when Zhao Chao found stability, when he had no more scruples, blood would flow. When that time came, the founding officials—including You Miao, Li Zhifeng, and Nie Dan—would all be purged. Li Yan wouldn’t be an exception, either; he would be granted death by Zhao Chao sooner or later.

It would be because they all knew too much, and knowing too much was the gravest of taboos in a ruler’s eyes. It simply wasn’t permitted.

Optimistically, Zhao Chao would grant him a dignified death and leave the rest of his clan alone. That would be good. But pessimistically, the entire You family could be annihilated.

You Miao had always feared this outcome, but when comparing it to the matter of the people and their livelihood, and the county, it was obvious what was more important—the latter issues, of course; which was why he prioritized them. But after everything was settled, You Miao would have to start thinking about how to save his own life. He was not ungrateful for Zhao Zhuo’s reminder tonight regarding his predicament.

“I have done all that I can,” Zhao Zhuo said. “The rest shall be left for future generations to judge. Farewell, Ziqian.”

Zhao Zhuo rose to his feet, and You Miao did the same. The two exchanged a bow between peers.

“Have a safe journey,” You Miao said.

With their tea finished, You Miao followed Zhao Zhuo out of the courtyard. A river flowed just outside. Mantled in a cloak, Zhao Zhuo descended the back-alley path, then boarded a small vessel that would carry him out to sea. The Quanrong guard followed him.

From where he stood at the boat's bow, Zhao Zhuo flashed You Miao a smile.

You Miao didn't return it, however. A giant boulder was weighing down his mind. He was starting to understand why the court officials wanted Zhao Zhuo back as emperor—it was for survival. None of them would oppose Zhao Chao like this if they weren't so scared that he'd hunt them down eventually regardless of their actions. They had no choice but to stand against him.

Establishing a government in the south had been the priority in their unprecedented times. However, dangers would slowly come to the surface as the years went on. The day the Central Plains were reclaimed would be the day that You Miao, Li Zhifeng, Nie Dan, and the rest would receive their death sentence.

You must extract yourself early... Zhao Zhuo's voice echoed ceaselessly in You Miao's ears.

[Chapter 60]

The sky had lightened by the time Zhao Zhuo left, and You Miao sighed in relief. He held Li Zhifeng's hand, and they headed home swinging their arms.

"That man is my brother's most loyal bodyguard," Li Zhifeng said.

"Let's think about that. How did he end up with your brother?" You Miao said.

They went over Zhao Zhuo's escape route, and there were only two possibilities. The first was that on Zhao Zhuo's journey south after leaving the convoy, he encountered the Quanrong tribe's armed forces and was taken in by Dalyeko. The second was that Zhao Zhuo had already connected with the Quanrong during the Tartar occupation of Da'an.

You Miao calculated the timeframe. The peace talks had happened at the beginning of the year, and it'd only been four months since then. On top of that was Zhao Zhuo's escape, faking his death... This inside story was too complicated. Judging from Zhao Zhuo's tone, it seemed he had known Dalyeko for some time, which meant he had doubtlessly become acquainted with Dalyeko during his time as a slave in Da'an.

"Right. Meaning it happened after I stole you away," Li Zhifeng said. "Hemetir must have gone to talk to my brother."

"Everything works out, then." You Miao nodded, his expression grave.

Hemetir had wanted Li Zhifeng to be the one to succeed the throne and take over the Quanrong. From his point of view, the little prince Sanado was more obedient and therefore much easier to control than the current heir Dalyeko—and he tripped big time. After Li Zhifeng and You Miao made their escape, Hemetir had to send word to the Quanrong, which was what prompted Dalyeko's engagement with the Tartars.

If Dalyeko had connected with Zhao Zhuo and agreed to save him, then it would make sense that Zhao Zhuo had joined the Quanrong after extricating himself from the convoy and had returned to Jiangnan under the protection of Dalyeko's personal bodyguard.

You Miao couldn't help but ask. "Between you and that bodyguard, who's stronger?"

"If I used my full strength, I could beat him," Li Zhifeng replied. "But I would still get hurt. He's one of the top fighters in the tribe."

You Miao gave a “mn.” That meant Dalyeko definitely thought very highly of Zhao Zhuo.

“What kind of person is your brother?” You Miao asked.

That was a difficult question for Li Zhifeng, and he didn’t answer it for the rest of their trip back to the gambling hall. By the time they got back, it was already bright out. You Miao instructed that Lin Xihe should be released, then he and Li Zhifeng went back to their room to lay in bed together.

Finally, Li Zhifeng said, “He and Zhao Zhuo are the same type of person.”

“Oh? Didn’t he try to kill you in the past?” You Miao pointed out.

Li Zhifeng only sighed in response. Now You Miao was even more curious about this Dalyeko character. “How is your brother’s skill in martial arts?”

“He’s not in good physical shape,” Li Zhifeng replied. “He’s only capable of simple training exercises. But he has other ways to make the tribespeople love him and the warriors die for him.”

You Miao was visibly moved by this, and Li Zhifeng added, “He knows how to command the army; he’s very intelligent. He’s got a good head on his shoulders.”

“So? He wants to revitalize the Quanrong tribe, does he?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Li Zhifeng said, lost in thought. “I didn’t understand, back then; only after I got together with you did I slowly start to understand many things. We Quanrong are also a tribe from beyond the Wall, and many years ago, we used to get bullied often by the Han, the Barbarians, the Tartars...”

You Miao didn’t interrupt him. The things Li Zhifeng spoke of now were matters he had never spoken of before. Gradually, You Miao came to understand that someone like Dalyeko also had something he ardently wished to achieve—providing his people with a better life.

The nomadic tribes coveted the resources available in the Central Plains, so it was possible that Dalyeko wanted to invade and conquer the area. Back then, Li Zhifeng was still too young and was completely engrossed in training; such notions never crossed his mind.

“Does everyone in the tribe approve of him?” You Miao asked.

“There are those who oppose him,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“Who are they?”

“My own supporters.” Li Zhifeng’s answer was succinct, and he didn’t elaborate after that.

However, You Miao pretty much got it. This was just another battle of strength. Almost every internal conflict was nothing more than a competition between perspectives. When it concerned the fate of the tribe—or the fate of a country—very few would want to let emotions affect their decisions. When You Miao was younger, he’d always thought that wars were caused by physical fighting. Now that he was older, he’d come to understand that many wars were actually caused by helplessness—an inability to resolve a conflict, or a difference of opinions.

And Li Zhifeng and Dalyeko were the spokespersons of two different perspectives within the Quanrong tribe.

One faction wanted to invade and fight Tianqi for land, in order to gain the resources needed to live a better life. This faction supported Dalyeko. As for the other faction, they believed the Quanrong had always been nomads of the steppes since ancient times—once a wolf settled in the Central Plains, it would inevitably become a dog. Tension thus began to build between the supporters of Sanado and Dalyeko. However, the young Sanado was naive and thought it was a simple contest for the throne—one which he had lost, and which resulted in his fall from grace and becoming a slave of the Han.

“But you have a home now. You’re a general with tens of thousands at your command,” You Miao consoled him. “There’s no need to mind the past so much. Besides, you’ll return one day.”

As he stared at the canopy above the bed, Li Zhifeng murmured, “I’m also quite shocked by how many years have passed in the blink of an eye. Likewise, there are many issues that I still can’t make a decision on.”

He flipped over and held You Miao. They were both exhausted after running around all night, so You Miao threw these problems to the back of his head and conked out.

* * *

When they woke again, rain was falling outside. All of Jiangnan, from the Su Prefecture to the Jiao and Yi Prefectures in the south, had entered the rainy season of the fourth month. The sky was dark and oppressive, and

beads of water rolled down in long strings from the eaves. After eating lunch, You Miao and Li Zhifeng cuddled under the eaves to watch the rain.

Each was occupied by their own thoughts, but both knew what the other was thinking about—Li Zhifeng was thinking about his brother, and You Miao was thinking about Zhao Zhuo.

The moment Zhao Zhuo left yesterday, You Miao had come to a sudden realization—there was a reason why so many would rather have Zhao Zhuo return than to have Zhao Chao continue his rule. The matter of whether to support an emperor could not be decided by what was right or wrong. At the very least, not many heads would roll if Zhao Zhuo returned to rule, and the officials' families would be safe. This was because Zhao Zhuo had been raised to be an emperor since he was young, and Zhao Chao had not been. It was as simple as that.

Had he returned as emperor, Zhao Zhuo would've known exactly how to proceed. First of all, he wouldn't have cornered the powerful ministers so aggressively. Back when the Li father and son were at court, nothing really happened to them despite their high positions. Zhao Zhuo had his methods when it came to the balance of power, the organization of government, and the government and management of officialdom. With his approach, everyone would be able to keep their lives, and You Miao himself could also retreat unscathed.

But when it came to Zhao Chao, absolute extermination was only a matter of time.

You Miao finally understood the ruthlessness Sun Yu's ruthlessness that came with age. In the face of a crisis, he immediately employed Zhao Chao; when the situation eased, he was ready to replace him and put Zhao Zhuo on the throne. But events never develop as one expects—Sun Yu chose to place the future in You Miao's hands at the last second instead of stubbornly hanging on to his own views. This was an extremely tough decision; daring to let go was far more difficult than daring to interfere.

Hopefully, Zhao Chao would do better, and nothing else would happen... You Miao still believed he could withdraw in one piece. After all, he'd never had an attachment to power from the start. As long as Li Zhifeng wanted, they could let go at any time and leave. When the time came and the situation looked perilous, they would just break away early. That was all.

Things just hadn't progressed to that point yet. The only issue was Nie Dan...

"What are you thinking about?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"About da-ge," You Miao said. "The prison is dark and cold; I hope he doesn't get sick."

"When we get back, I'll unite the army and submit a petition for lao-san to release him," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao answered with a "mn." Zhao Chao hadn't been able to drop his dignity at the time, but now that the dust had settled, reversing the edict on Zhao Zhuo's case would be impossible. Nie Dan would have to be released sooner or later.

"Come," You Miao said, "Let's collect debt at the Lins' place."

"Collect debt? I thought you agreed to let him go?" Li Zhifeng wondered.

"I agreed to let *him* go, but I didn't agree to let his debt go," You Miao said.

There was still a chip on You Miao's shoulder, only because he still hadn't fully figured out why Zhao Zhuo had asked Lin Xihe to do what he did. Judging by the look of things, Zhao Zhuo was here to recruit Jianghu men. Why did he involve Lin Xihe? Was it maybe because the Censor-in-Chief Lin Zhengtao was from the Lin family?

On the surface, it looked like Zhao Zhuo had let things go, but who knows what he really thought. Would he want to take a last gamble? Or did he simply want to lure out You Miao, and use him as an official who could pass on the message to Zhao Chao?

When You Miao came knocking at the Lins' place, the entire family was startled. They knew their youngest son loved to gamble and freely give money away, but nobody had ever expected Li Zhifeng and You Miao to personally visit with the debt receipt and demand payment. The Lin patriarch slapped Lin Xihe across the face twice, right then and there. You Miao didn't stop him, and only grinned as he watched Lin Xihe being disciplined.

In the end, the Lin residence presented two thousand silver and said that they would do what they could to pay off the rest. Thus, You Miao stopped hassling.

With two grand in the gambling house's coffers, You Miao wrote a letter to Qin Shaonan at the capital and told him to give Lin Zhengtao a heads-up

—You Miao would head back to the capital shortly, purely for the sake of seeing the Censor-in-Chief report himself for misconduct. Li Zhifeng was caught between laughter and tears at You Miao's antics; You Miao obviously still remembered those twelve memorials that had been brought against Li Zhifeng.

After wrapping up the case, You Miao stayed in Yi Prefecture almost another two weeks. He splurged on a boat, planning on using it to transport goods from Yi Prefecture to Yang Prefecture for sale. If nothing unexpected happened, he would stay in Yi Prefecture for the rest of the year.

Although summers in Yi Prefecture were hot, the winters were not cold. Commerce thrived amidst the damp sea breeze, no less than it did at Riverwave Estate. As for the message Zhao Zhuo wanted him to deliver, You Miao didn't want to give it to Zhao Chao just yet.

He needed to wait for an opportune time to do it, anyway.

On the contrary—maybe it'd be better if he *didn't* tell Zhao Chao at all. If Zhao Zhuo's whereabouts remained unknown, perhaps Zhao Chao would continue to be wary; if Zhao Chao learned that Zhao Zhuo had left for Dongying, he might lose his scruples.

Li Zhifeng and You Miao settled down in Yi Prefecture. Li Zhifeng was keen on the street-style martial arts of the Central Plains—all martial arts originated from the same roots, and he was naturally endowed with strength and possessed an excellent foundation, so he would go into town every day to watch and spar with the Jianghu martial artists. Throughout his life, every skill Li Zhifeng had acquired had been associated with the killing arts—warfare, riding, shooting, hacking, slaughter. Now that he had at last calmed down and began focusing on studying the martial arts of the Central Plains, it was as though he had discovered a brand-new world; hence the reason why he and You Miao decided to stick around Yi Prefecture. They purchased a quiet courtyard behind the gambling hall, as well as a few boy servants.

During the day, Li Zhifeng would go out to stroll and shop at leisure while You Miao stayed at home to drink tea, chitchat with the neighbors, and take care of the garden. At noon, You Miao would lazily go out to a tavern to meet Li Zhifeng for lunch.

For half a year, life went on thus; time truly flies when one is carefree. During this time, Li Zhifeng took notes on many arts that could help

strengthen one's health and body, with the intention of using them for training the army upon his return.

One day, the gambling hall's manager sent a message that a letter had arrived from Yang Prefecture. Lord Uncle was telling the two lords to go home.

At this point, it had been nearly seven months since You Miao left home. It was also time for the Autumn Harvest at Riverwave Estate, so he supposed that he'd have to go home for New Year's. To his surprise, however, it wasn't Qiao Jue's personal script when he opened the letter, but instead Qiao Rong's graceful writing.

Qiao Rong first expressed how much they were missed, then she mentioned the family-owned Moyan Pavilion had been open for business for half a year and there were matters she wanted to discuss with You Miao upon his return. It probably involved Nie Dan. You Miao did a quick calculation in his head—it was about time. Although he wasn't an official anymore, Li Zhifeng was still a general; he could step forward to protect Nie Dan. If Zhao Chao was no longer being stubborn about it, maybe he would even release Nie Dan to spend New Year's at Riverwave Estate.

Thus, Li Zhifeng packed the ship they would take with goods they'd purchased in Yi Prefecture. They decided to take a water route; out to sea and northward before entering Yang Prefecture from the mouth of the Yangtze.

Not much had changed in Yang Prefecture in the past half year. After they disembarked, You Miao first had some laborers unload their cargo. Li Zhifeng was a little seasick and sat by the shoreside to rest, looking withered. Finding his rare bout of discomfort hilarious, You Miao hugged him from behind and leaned on his back to target a seldom-made jab at Li Zhifeng.

"The big pupper gets seasick too?"

Looking blue in the face and ready to vomit, Li Zhifeng waved You Miao off and told him not to be a nuisance. As the two laughed and joked around, a carriage stopped at the pier. Qiao Rong emerged, beaming at You Miao.

"We won't be riding in the carriage," You Miao said. "We'll take our time and walk back."

"Let me walk with you, then," Qiao Rong replied. "Li-da-ge will feel better after some ginger tea when we get back."

Li Zhifeng looked woeful as he walked.

"How's business at the pavilion?" You Miao asked.

Seemingly preoccupied, Qiao Rong said, "Fairly good. I went and paid respects for auntie's death anniversary."

"I was in Yi Prefecture this year, so I burned incense from faraway," You Miao said. "It's almost winter; come to the estate for a few days. It'll be livelier with more people, and we can wait for New Year's together."

They were already in the tenth month, and judging by the steadily dropping temperature, snow would start coming down in another few days. However, Qiao Rong's response to the invite was only a sigh.

"Your da-ge is still in prison," she said.

"In a few days, Li Zhifeng will submit a joint petition in the name of the army to request His Majesty release da-ge. If the timing works out, he could be home in time for New Year's."

"Never mind, forget it..."

There seemed to be some unsolvable problem causing Qiao Rong's distress, and You Miao asked, "What's wrong, jie?"

Qiao Rong said, "It's a long story. Let's talk after we're back at the pavilion."

The sky was gloomy, and as evening fell, northerly winds began to blow. Moyan Pavilion was bustling with endless people going in and out of its doors. It was now ranked as the top business in Yang Prefectural City, and possessed much the same extravagance as the old capital. You Miao couldn't help but marvel at his little uncle's ability to do business.

"Settle in and take a bath first, then come by the side garden in a bit for dinner," Qiao Rong said.

You Miao nodded, and then went off with Li Zhifeng for their bath. They drank a bit of ginger broth, which dissolved all their travel fatigue.

When they eventually went to the side garden as instructed, a familiar voice greeted them.

"You guys ran off to Yi Prefecture for so long. Did you plan to never come back?"

You Miao and Li Zhifeng were both taken aback. The person waiting in the garden was, unexpectedly, Zhao Chao.

You Miao smiled. "San-ge."

Li Zhifeng nodded, and the pair took their seats.

"Did something happen in Yi Prefecture?" Zhao Chao asked.

“My family opened a gambling hall. I went to check up on how the business was doing,” You Miao answered.

To that, Zhao Chao questioned contemplatively, “Didn’t run into anyone, did you?”

You Miao felt his heart stop for a second, and Li Zhifeng creased his brows.

He knows? No way—he even knows what went on in Yi Prefecture? That’s a little too *impressive. Who sent him the message? Or is he only suspicious? That can’t be; he can be suspicious of anyone except me. He’s probably just probing.* After thinking it over in silence, You Miao answered, “I didn’t run into anyone. Is something wrong?”

Zhao Chao didn’t elaborate, and only said casually, “Yi Prefecture is swarming with Jianghu men; it’s a vulgar crowd.”

You Miao nodded, but didn’t respond to the observation. A moment later, he asked, “You thought there’d be news of someone in particular?”

Zhao Chao froze imperceptibly.

“Relax, I don’t think anything would happen,” You Miao said.

Zhao Chao nodded in relief, then said, “You’ve had your fun and you’ve taken your break. So when are you coming back?”

You Miao never imagined Zhao Chao would bring that up. At first, he thought Zhao Chao was only here to drink some tea and listen to some tunes. After over half a year, Zhao Chao actually still thought that You Miao was merely taking a break because he was tired—unbelievable.

“The position I promised you is still reserved,” Zhao Chao said. “Tang Bo isn’t one of my men; I’m not comfortable giving him the Administration Chamber.”

“Everything at court is on track now,” You Miao replied. “I... To be honest, I’m not cut out to be an official.”

Unlike last time, You Miao didn’t say anything spiteful like, *“I won’t be a nuisance in front of you.”* He genuinely didn’t want the job, and it wasn’t because he was angry at Zhao Chao. Just as Zhao Zhuo had said, he needed to get himself out of there early; he couldn’t keep sinking deeper. If You Miao brought up the past, Zhao Chao could simply counter with an assurance that he wasn’t angry with him anymore, which would make it harder for You Miao to step down.

“Er-ge is still a general,” Zhao Chao said casually. “Even though there’s no war, there are still matters to attend to at court every so often. Are you

going to stay in the estate all by yourself?"

"San-di, hear me," Li Zhifeng spoke up. "You Miao doesn't want to return to court, so don't keep trying to force him."

Zhao Chao was slightly upset, but in the end, he didn't say anything more on the subject.

With a smile, You Miao said, "The food at Moyan Pavilion is delicious. Since you're here, listen to some songs and drink a little, yeah?"

At Zhao Chao's affirmative grunt, You Miao stood to give the staff instructions. Food was served shortly after, but Zhao Chao seemed absent-minded while the songs were playing.

As one song finished, Zhao Chao turned to Li Zhifeng and said, "Your brother and Hemetir have formed an alliance. Are you aware of this?"

Li Zhifeng nodded slowly, and You Miao's heart thumped nervously.

Zhao Chao continued to speak. "Originally, if si-di was willing to return to court, I was planning on releasing da-ge. We'd all be just like we used to be..."

That's playing dirty, You Miao thought.

"So if You Miao doesn't go back to court, da-ge won't be released. Is that it?" Li Zhifeng said coolly.

Zhao Chao snorted. "Without you two around, da-ge would eat me alive as soon as he's out."

"He won't." You Miao laughed.

"Only *you* think that he won't," Zhao Chao said coldly.

And the three fell silent again. There really was nothing good that could come from meeting Zhao Chao today. You Miao felt as if he and Li Zhifeng were shooting down everything Zhao Chao said. He would have made concessions if he could have, but everything Zhao Chao proposed were things he couldn't budge on.

Sensing that the atmosphere had become strained, Zhao Chao changed the topic and asked, "Er-ge, who would win if you and your brother were to engage in battle?"

Li Zhifeng considered the question for a moment before he said, "If war breaks out, then I will take You Miao on the expedition with me. There's about a fifty percent chance of victory."

His answer made Zhao Chao hesitate, and he didn't speak.

"There's no need to rush into it in the next few years," You Miao said.

“Jiangnan’s recovery speed this year is faster than you and I anticipated,” Zhao Chao said. “Within two or three years, we’ll dispatch the army to the Central Plains. This cannot wait any longer.”

You Miao gave that calculation serious thought. This was the third year after the southern migration. When the Administration Chamber had hosted that public debate in the years Sun Yu was still alive, You Miao had said they would have to raise an army to reclaim the Central Plains within five years; at most ten. Otherwise, there would be no hope of doing so for the rest of their lives. Once the domestic economy had recovered, going to war would no doubt have the support of the people.

He took a moment to imagine what the public opinion would be if war was announced today. It would certainly not be the same as it had been a few years ago.

“Within the next three years is indeed the best timing, but we’ll have to be absolutely prepared if we’re going to declare war,” You Miao said.

“And what kind of preparation would that entail?” Zhao Chao asked coolly.

“First, ensure the homefront is fully confident in the endeavor so we can push the greatest level of support for the warfront,” You Miao started. “Second, there cannot be any differences of opinions between generals, so let da-ge command the army. Third, if we open fire in the Central Plains, we must recognize that we will face war on many fronts. The Quanrong, the Huns, the Tartars...all three are immensely difficult to deal with. Fourth, juniors from the southern gentry must be forbidden from mixing into the military, lest they use the war as a chance to win accolades. Fifth, the government must not summon General Nie back from the frontlines under any circumstances, in order to avoid spoiling any progress we may make...”

“Why don’t you return to court after all, You Ziqian?” Zhao Chao said.

You Miao heaved a long sigh. “Let me think about it.”

He didn’t reject him directly this time. Restoring the Central Plains to its former glory had been the last part of their vows a long time ago. It was also Sun Yu’s will.

“I plan on exonerating Tu Risheng, then having him run the army’s training,” Zhao Chao said.

You Miao raised his eyebrows. “Tu Risheng... He’s capable of assembling a peasant army of a hundred thousand, so he’s indeed got some skill in his pocket. But I’ve never formally confronted him...”

“He wrote a memorial while in prison that was over ten thousand words long,” Zhao Chao said. “He analyzed for me the situation in the north, as well as the conditions under which Jiangnan would support war. I think his evaluation is rather sound. Come to the palace when you’re free, and I’ll show it to you then.”

You Miao nodded.

Zhao Chao continued, “The man might have come from a poor family and couldn’t land any rankings in the state exams, but he does have some skill. He’s read many books on the art of war. I hope it’s not all talk.”

“Try him out,” You Miao said. “The moment he heard the amnesty order back then, he dispersed the peasant army and was willing to come back alone to face death. That proves his loyalty to Your Majesty.”

“Hm.” Zhao Chao took another sip of wine and fell into a pensive silence.

You Miao suddenly felt a little gratified. Zhao Chao had finally begun to understand some things, and was no longer solely basing his actions on his own preferences.

Li Zhifeng spoke up, “How many men will you give me to fight my brother?”

“I was just going to ask you—what are you plans after defeating your brother?” Zhao Chao questioned.

“They remain as was previously agreed,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“The Quanrong won’t invade the Central Plains again, right?”

Li Zhifeng nodded.

“Will you be able to persuade your people on that topic?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll give you twenty thousand men,” Zhao Chao promised.

“That’s not enough,” Li Zhifeng objected.

“Let me be blunt here—if you’re going back to fight for the throne, you don’t need military force. You need your brains.” Zhao Chao shot You Miao a look, meaning “*you understand this, too.*”

He then added, “I can’t give you more than that, anyway. Besides, this time, the declaration of war is in the name of reclaiming the north. I know what I promised you, but the people don’t, and there’s no way the soldiers will sacrifice themselves for a foreigner like you.”

This seemed to have made Li Zhifeng’s anger flare, and he questioned back, “Foreigners can die for the Hans, but the Hans won’t die for me, a

Quanrong? Whose lives are precious and whose are cheap here?!”

You Miao quickly intervened. “All right, all right...”

Zhao Chao was also furious now, and he exclaimed angrily, “You know best why you’re actually fighting wars for the Hans! Would you even go to battle if not for You Ziqian? Don’t give me that bullshit!”

You Miao hadn’t expected the two to start fighting after only a few short exchanges, though Zhao Chao’s temper had always been violent. “We can cross that bridge when we get to it. Calm down, both of you,” he quickly interjected.

“I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to,” Li Zhifeng said. “Now is the time for you to fulfill your promises. No excuses—you are the Son of Heaven.”

“It’s precisely because I’m the Son of Heaven that no subject has any right to demand that I fulfill anything,” Zhao Chao stated severely.

“But I’m not your subject,” Li Zhifeng sharply retorted.

With that, Zhao Chao blew up in an instant. He glowered at Li Zhifeng, unable to utter a single word. Initially, You Miao had wanted to talk to him, but suddenly realized that Zhao Chao couldn’t actually do anything to Li Zhifeng. Thus, he didn’t bother, and was instead, he was filled with a sense of schadenfreude—he quite wanted to see how, exactly, Zhao Chao planned on dealing with Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng still regarded Zhao Chao with the same stoic calm that betrayed nothing, and Zhao Chao calmed down after panting for a moment—and then, he actually nodded in agreement.

“You’re right.”

“You promised me fifty thousand men. You can’t go back on your word,” Li Zhifeng said.

“I really can’t help that,” Zhao Chao said with a smile. “You’ve commanded the army yourself; you know this. We have no more than sixty thousand battle-ready men in total; where would you suggest I find fifty thousand to spare?”

Originally, Li Zhifeng had wanted to wait until the Central Plains were reclaimed before he borrowed the force of fifty thousand from Zhao Chao to end things once and for all with Dalyeko in the north. But since Dalyeko had joined in the bid for the Central Plains, Zhao Chao subsumed his promise into the northern expedition to resolve both aims simultaneously. There was some sense to that; upon analysis, You Miao actually considered

this to be a good way to deal with the problems at hand. It would expedite things, and the forces would be easier to borrow if they were part of the northern expedition.

"Let's do it that way for now," You Miao spoke up, then sent Li Zhifeng a look. Li Zhifeng nodded and didn't say anything more.

After finishing his cup of wine, Zhao Chao said, "It's settled, then. I'm off."

You Miao had wanted to keep him, but Zhao Chao had already stood. "I still have memorials to process when I go back. I'll come another day when I'm free."

With that, You Miao had to see Zhao Chao off. Zhao Chao's expression had been dark the whole visit—from the beginning of the evening until the time he finally left—and he didn't speak any more than necessary. You Miao could vaguely feel his head throb.

Setting that aside for now, You Miao turned to Li Zhifeng and explained his analysis of the situation. After a long contemplation, Li Zhifeng nodded at last.

"That means I can take you away once the northern expedition is over."

"Once the northern expedition is *victorious*," You Miao corrected him. "Then we can pull out."

Li Zhifeng was delighted all the same. "That's true. I didn't think about that."

When Qiao Rong saw Zhao Chao had left, she entered the yard, her face pale. You Miao and Li Zhifeng stopped their conversation and gazed toward her.

"What did he tell you two?" Qiao Rong asked.

Knowing that she wanted an update on Nie Dan's case, You Miao answered, "My da-ge will be released."

"I wasn't asking about him. Was there anything else?"

You Miao paused. "Should there have been anything else?"

Just then, an announcement was made regarding the arrival of a palace attendant, and the man entered shortly after. You Miao was puzzled.

"General Li, Lord You, congratulations," said the attendant with a smile.

"An imperial edict?" You Miao was surprised. Didn't Zhao Chao just leave...? Why was there an imperial edict? He composed himself and said, "I am no longer a member of the court. This peasant, You Miao, has received the edict."

“No need for such ceremony, Lord You. This is a verbal edict from His Majesty,” the attendant said. “His Majesty has been frequenting Moyan Pavilion for a long time. After learning of Miss Qiao’s bachelorette status, he bade me discuss with Lord You the matter of conducting the Empress ceremony...”

A loud noise rumbled in You Miao’s head. The world was sent spinning, and his sight went black. In disbelief, he exclaimed, “*What the heck*?!”

“She’s not marrying,” Li Zhifeng succinctly rejected the palace attendant, whose face instantly changed color.

Immediately, You Miao knew this was no small matter. But how could this have come to pass?

The colors of Qiao Rong’s face also changed, and she hastily spoke up, “General Li, don’t say that...”

After a momentary shock, the palace attendant composed himself and smiled. “Lord General does jest. Lord You, it is worth tremendous celebration that His Majesty should take fancy to a member of the Qiao family. We will have to address you as Lord State Uncle. When His Majesty came by today, it was with the intention of mentioning this to you personally—but alas, he was somehow unable to speak it aloud. Lord You, won’t you see what day you can come to the palace to discuss this matter, and this lowly one can report back with the details?”

“Please report to His Majesty that I will definitely go to the palace to discuss this,” You Miao replied.

The palace attendant nodded and took his leave. The games that Zhao Chao was playing were going to send You Miao to his grave.

“Why didn’t you tell me this beforehand?” You Miao asked Qiao Rong, frowning.

Looking downcast, Qiao Rong sighed and didn’t answer.

[Volume 4 End]

Glossary

Name Guide

When addressing another person in Chinese, it is the polite convention to refer to them by their title or position rather than their name, especially if the person is in a station above you. Likewise, to convey humility, one would refer to oneself as one's position or a vague, lower-status entity. The direct addresses of "you," "I," or "me" are considered to be vulgar, or imply a more familiar relationship.

Diminutives, Nicknames, Nametags

General

- **Da-:** "Big." Always a prefix.

- **-Er:** "Son" or "Child." Always a suffix. An affectionate address from an elder, or used as a familiar diminutive for those of lower status.

- **Lao-:** "Old." Always a prefix. Used for familiar elders, family, or close friends.

- **Xiao-:** "Little." Always a prefix.

- **-Zi:** Same as -Er.

Family

- **Shu(shu):** Younger paternal uncle. Can be used to address familiar elders.

- **Da-ge:** Oldest brother, or a casual familiar address for an older male friend.

- **Di(di):** Familiar address for younger brother or a younger male friend.

- **Ge(ge):** Familiar address for older brother or an older male friend.

- **Jie(jie):** Familiar address for an older sister or an older female friend.

- **Jiu(jiu):** Maternal uncle.

- **Jiuma:** Maternal uncle's wife.

- **Sao(zi):** Sister-in-law, the wife of your older brother or familiar older male friend of the same generation.

- **Xiandi:** "Wise/worthy younger brother." Formal term of respect for a younger brother or a younger male friend.

- **Xiao-di:** Casual familiar address for a younger brother or a younger male friend. Can also mean "lackey" depending on context.

- **Xiao-jiu:** "Little (maternal) uncle." Affectionate.

- **Xiong:** Elder brother, or a familiar address for a male friend.

- **Xiongdi:** Generic word for "Brother." Can refer to both family or friends.

- **Yudi**: "Foolish little brother." Formal self-diminutive for a younger brother or a younger male friend addressing the older.

- **Yuxiong:** "Foolish older brother." Formal self-diminutive for an older brother or an older male friend addressing the younger.

When there is more than one family member in the same generation, they are assigned a number according to their birth, and addressed as such rather than by direct names. The eldest is given "Da," then "-Er" for second-oldest, and so on.

Example: Ping Xi is the second son in his family, so he is nicknamed Ping-Er. Qiao Jue calls Qiao Ke-er "san-jie" or "third sis" because she is the third child.

1: Da
2: Er
3: San
4: Si
5: Wu

Oldest: Lao-da
Youngest: Lao-yao
Titles

- **Gongzi:** Young Master or Gentleman. A broad term of respect for the son of a noble or affluent birth.

- **Laoye:** Master or Lord; the master of a house or a lord official/officer.

- **Shaoye:** Young Master or Young Lord. A term of respect used by those in service of the house.

Barbarians: Ethnic groups outside the border of China, and specifically in this text, the nomadic tribes north of the Great Wall of China. The specific tribes that encroach on the northern Chinese border vary by period.

Beyond the Border/Wall: Refers to the land beyond the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall is a massive, extensive bulwark that stretches across northern China and southern Mongolia. Traditionally built for defense against the peoples north of the Chinese border, the wall consists of multiple "passes" that are major strongholds in strategic points of the wall for both defense and international trade.

Capital Army: The army stationed outside the capital city that defends it and its surrounding areas.

Central Plains: Also known as the "Middle Kingdom" or "Midland," it is the part of the North China Plain that surrounds the lower and middle reaches of the Yellow River. It is where the Han ethnicity was conceived and believed to be the center of the world. It has been the political, economic, and cultural center of Chinese civilization for a large part of Chinese history.

Due Diligence Army: When the monarch is in trouble, the Order of Due Diligence is issued to all officials within the kingdom and those who have sworn allegiance to the country to rise and protect the throne. Their assembled army is the Due Diligence Army.

Holidays:

- **New Year:** The most important holiday on the calendar, and marks the start of a new year. An important time for family gatherings and wrapping up business from the previous year.

● **Shangyuan/Lantern Festival/Yuanxiao:** Shangyuan Festival, also known as Yuanxiao, is the Lantern Festival. It is held on the first full moon of the new year, marking the end of New Year.

Imperial Army: The army stationed inside the capital city that oversees its security and interior defense.

Imperial State Exam: A civil service examination system for selecting candidates for state bureaucracy. Civil Service and Scholarship reward the highest prestige for a citizen regardless of background.

Memorial to the Throne: A carefully crafted essay presenting an issue to communicate to the emperor. Depending on the circumstances, it is sometimes also directed to certain officials.

Political Advisor: A position established in the Song Dynasty. It started as a role akin to Deputy Chancellor and later evolved to one that is equal to a Chancellor.

Red Pocket/Envelope: A monetary gift. Red is the color for joyous occasions.

Tanghulu: Candied fruit skewers. The fruit is traditionally Chinese hawberry, but it can be other fruits such as strawberries.

Vassal King: The ruler and lord of a territory conferred by the emperor, to whom they owe allegiance. The title given to vassal kings is "Prince." Vassal Kings are often imperial princes who will not succeed the throne, and military aristocrats.

Government

The structure of government is simplified in this work.

Emperor → Censorate
→ Hanlin Academy
→ Administration Chamber → Six Ministries

Administration Chamber: The administrative body that assists the Emperor in facilitating and streamlining government affairs. They also provide counsel and advice. A staff member at the Administration Chamber has the title **Supervisory Secretary**.

Censorate: The independent department that supervises officialdom. It is the second highest office after the Chancellor. The censors report directly to the emperor.

Directorate of Education: The department of education that determined the subjects and standards of studies on a national level, and

was the largest library and publisher of various writings. The Imperial College was the school under this agency, though it was only for monarchs and the children of high officials, to groom them for court. In certain dynasties, the Directorate of Education and the Imperial College were a single entity.

Hanlin Academy: An institution whose members are the elite literati of the nation. They perform literary and administrative duties for the imperial court, such as drafting initial legislation.

Ministry of Justice: In charge of judicial and penal processes, but has no supervisory role over the Censorate or the Supreme Court.

Ministry of Personnel: In charge of appointments, merit ratings, promotions, demotions, and granting of honorific titles.

Ministry of Revenue: In charge of census data, tax collection, state revenue, and currency management.

Ministry of Rites: In charge of state and religious ceremonies, foreign relations, and the imperial state examination.

Ministry of War: In charge of appointments, promotions and demotions of military officers, maintenance of military installations, equipment and weapons, as well as the courier system. In times of war, the Ministry of War also serves as strategists and advisors to the frontline commanders.

Ministry of Works: In charge of government engineering and construction projects, hiring of artisans and laborers for temporary service, manufacturing government equipment, the maintenance of roads and canals, standardization of weights and measures, and the gathering of resources from territories.

Supreme Court: An agency in charge of reviewing judicial proceedings at all administrative levels, and singling out cases for retrial by court officials or the Emperor himself. Works closely with the Censorate and the Ministry of Justice.

Measurement

This translation uses predominantly the American Imperial System, and at times Metric. The numbers are approximated for ease of reading and are not to be scrutinized.

Currency

The currency used is ingots of gold, silver, and copper coins. They are further weighed to calculate denominations.

1 tael of gold = 30 taels of silver
1 tael of silver = 1000 copper coins
1 mace of silver = 100 copper coins

Broken Silver: Refers to silver pieces that are smaller than one tael and used like loose change, their value dependent on their weight.

One String of Coins: Another way to say 1000 copper coins, as the coins are usually stringed.

Time

Shichen: The day is divided into 12 shichen with roughly 2 hours per shichen.

- Zi [midnight]: 11pm - 1am
- Chou: 1am - 3am
- Yin: 3am - 5am
- Mao [sunrise]: 5am - 7am
- Chen: 7am - 9am
- Si: 9am - 11am
- Wu [noon]: 11am - 1pm
- Wei: 1pm - 3pm
- Shen: 3pm - 5pm
- You [sunset]: 5pm - 7pm
- Xu [dusk]: 7pm - 9pm
- Hai: 9pm - 11pm

Geng: The night after sundown is further divided into five geng, otherwise known as five periods or five watches. At the start of every watch, a Gengfu, or a Night-Watchman, will make a round of the city and strike a wooden plank to signal the time.

- 1 geng: 7pm - 9pm
- 2 geng: 9pm - 11pm
- 3 geng: 11pm - 1am
- 4 geng: 1am - 3am
- 5 geng: 3am - 5am

Incense Time: Incense sticks are made to measure time by a day, an hour, half an hour, and so forth. When referenced in this novel, it means 30

minutes.

[1] Only the emperor is permitted to wear yellow robes.

[2] Boyi and Shuqi were princes of the last reign of Shang Dynasty, ~1046 B.C. The Zhou conquered Shang, but kept the princes alive. Out of shame, the two princes refused to eat the grain granted by the Zhou and died from starvation.

[3] From the second quatrain of "Playful Set of Six Quatrains" by Du Fu, Tang Dynasty.

[4] "Cold food" in this context refers to the constitution of the food item, not necessarily its temperature. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, "cold food" is food that causes cooling within the body. Example foods include watermelon, cucumber, and mint.

[5] The twelfth month of the lunar calendar is commonly called "La," meaning "rites." It is the last month of the year, and a report of the past year's events is given to the heavens and the ancestors before welcoming the new year. "Laba," or "Eighth of the La Month," is a day for remembering ancestors; when Buddhism took root in China, Laba instead became known as the day the Sakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment, and thus is also known as Enlightenment Day. Because it is both the coldest time of winter as well as the start of the last month of the year, Laba congee is traditionally eaten on this day. Laba congee primarily consists of a variety of nuts, but depending on region, it can also contain meat, vegetables, and tofu. The Laba Festival isn't as serious an occasion as the Mid-Autumn Festival, so most families only focus on stewing Laba congee. In the context of the story, there is no deeper significance to Xie Hui hosting an event for singles on this day.

[6] A type of word game. A player begins the game with a line of poetic verse, and the next player has to compose a verse to match and complete the couplet.

[7] A feudal policy where troops open up wasteland for growing grain.

[8] From "Farewell to My Wife" by Su Shi, of the Song Dynasty. The poem depicts a pair of newlyweds who are happily in love, but are soon separated when the husband must go to war.

[9] A general, military strategist, writer, and philosopher. He is traditionally credited with writing *The Art of War*.

[10] Maternal female older cousin.

[11] "Fishermen's Melody: Autumn Languish" by Fan Zhongyan, Song Dynasty.

[12] "Midnight Song: Autumn" by Li Bai, Tang Dynasty.

[13] Fourth younger brother.

[14] Second younger brother.

[15] "A Recruit's Resentment" by Liu Zhongyong, Tang Dynasty. This poem bemoans the dreary, seemingly endless routine of war at the northern frontier.

[16] A verse from "From Chang'an to Feng Xian" by Du Fu, Tang Dynasty. It describes how the mansions of the rich stank with the abundance of food that had gone bad, while the streets were lined

with the bodies of the starving poor.

[17] A verse from “To My Sons” by Lu You, Song Dynasty. The poem expresses the poet’s sadness and his strong wish to reclaim his homeland.

[18] “Midnight Song: Autumn” by Li Bai, Tang Dynasty.

[19] Canliao is the name of Su Shi’s bosom friend, and was a monk who was well-versed in Buddhist classics and poetry. This poem was a gift, composed when Su Shi was promoted from the Governor of Hang Prefecture in the south to Hanlin Academician at court in the northern capital.

[20] From “To My Sons” by Lu You, Southern Song Dynasty.

[21] “Second Burial” is a funerary practice prevalent in East and Southeast Asia. Three to five years after a dead person is buried, the coffin is unearthed and the remaining bones inside are removed. They are stored in a previously prepared urn and then reburied.

[22] Pai Gow / “Make Nine” is the Chinese version of baccarat, played with domino tiles.

[23] Dai Siu / “Big or Small”, also known as Sic Bo. It is a game where two or three dice are rolled and players bet on the outcome of the roll. 4-10 is small, and 11-17 is big.

[24] “Shaoxia” means “young hero.”

[25] A term for Ancient Japan.